

# THE FINAL SWING

The Tragic Story of three Quebec Women  
Hanged for a Crime.

JEAN-CLAUDE CASTEX



*To Marie Brown*



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**The tragic story of three Quebec women hanged for a crime.**

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2. Marie-Josephte Corriveau, 1733-1763.
3. Marie-Anne Crispin, ----1858

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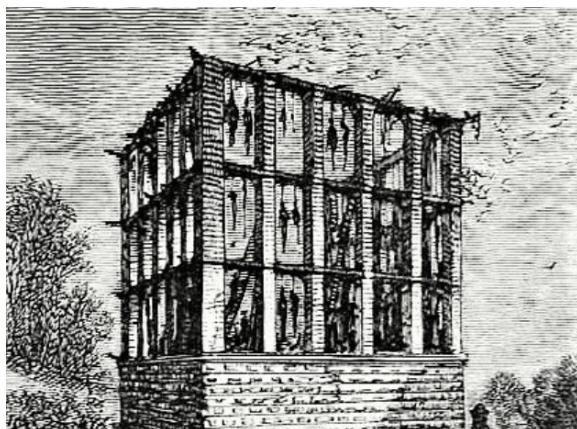
## *The Ballad of the Hanged<sup>1</sup>*

*Human brothers who after us live.*

*Do not let your hearts harden against us.*

*For if you have pity on us, poor men,*

*God will be merciful for you.*



*THE MONTFAUCON GALLOWS, located outside Paris in the Middle Ages. The site corresponds to the Place du Colonel Fabien. Pers. Cpl.*

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<sup>1</sup> •François Villon composed this poem in prison in 1462, while awaiting execution. The text has been modernised; see the original on the internet. Degraded of his status as a cleric, put to the question of water, Villon was condemned to be "strangled and hanged on the gallows of Paris". The Prévôté was determined to get rid of this repeat offender. In other words, he was a rogue privileged one.

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*You see us tied here, five or six:  
As for our flesh, which we have fed too much.  
Is long since devoured and rotted away.  
And our bones become ashes and dust.  
Let no one laugh at our misfortune.  
But pray God that everyone absolve us  
The rain washed us clean  
And the sun has dried and blackened us:  
Magpies and crows gouged out our eyes.  
And plucked out beards and eyebrows.  
Never for a moment are we sitting still:  
Here and there, as the wind turns.  
It never ceases to toss us about as it pleases.  
More stabbed by birds' beaks than thimbles.  
So don't be in our Brotherhood<sup>2</sup>.  
But pray God that all absolve us!  
Prince Jesus, who has power over all.*

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<sup>2</sup> The *Brotherhood of Thieves*. François Villon composed this poem in prison in 1462, while awaiting execution. The text has been modernized; see the original on the Internet.

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*May hell have no power over us:*

*Let us have nothing to do or settle with it.*

*Men, no jokes here,*

*But pray God that all absolve us.*

By François Villon (Adapted Text)



## PREAMBLE

According to a medieval superstition, under the gibbets grew mandrakes. These plants, whose roots were vaguely human in shape, are said to have been sown there by the semen of the hanged, which, it was claimed, was poured out on the earth. For, as the executioners well knew, hanging had the physiological effect of generating erections. This singular phenomenon had not failed to be noticed and appreciated by those pleasure-seekers who used to suffer from chronic or senile impotence, before the famous blue pill existed. A momentary hanging could effectively replace the random effect of supposedly aphrodisiac love potions. And witches, many of whom were in those days of credulity, came to gather these mandrakes, which were said to possess magical virtues

However, in the course of these curious erotogenic hangings, certain accidents did not fail to occur when pleasure exceeded prudence, or when the excess of pleasure led to the unconsciousness of the voluntary hangman.

Among the celebrities who resorted to this innocuous perversion, and who experienced not only earthly pleasure but eternal bliss, the best known was undoubtedly the last Prince de Condé<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> •His name was Louis VI de Bourbon (1756-1830).

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Sophie Dawes<sup>4</sup>, an English adventuress of commoner condition, first taught her noble and wealthy lover the art of attaining the Seventh Heaven by skillful strangulation. She had collected and compiled these hedonistic recipes from English aristocrats whose wives, gravely affected by acute Victorian puritanism, refused to surrender their frigid bodies to the libidinous perversions of their spouses. Sophie Dawes also had the essential task of cutting the rope when her old lover reached the abyss of voluptuousness, at the extreme limit of life, at the ultimate threshold of death.

Men are said to be torn to their last breath by very demanding carnal needs, even —and especially— when their bodies can no longer meet the expectations of their minds. This chronic deficiency leaves them with unfulfilled desires and permanent suffering.

The sexual passion offered by the red-haired Englishwoman to the last Prince de Condé made her indispensable to him. She was ennobled through her marriage to the prince's Aide-de-Camp, the Battalion Commander Adrien Victor Feuchères. Sophie Dawes, the new Baroness de Feuchères, became the rich heiress of the last Prince de Condé when she cut the rope a few seconds late. Like you at this very moment, dear reader, some minds have not failed to describe this tragic delay as highly suspicious.

But let the gossips denigrate and the cronies fantasize; It was certainly a lamentable end for this French prince of high nobility

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<sup>4</sup> •She was born in St. Helens, Isle of Wight (UK), September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1790, and died in London December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1840.

but low virtue, which some men afflicted with the same miseries have perhaps not refrained from envying.



The death penalty by hanging has always been inflicted on male and female commoners. The nobles reserved for themselves the privilege of decapitation by sword or axe, which was estimated to be less shameful, if not more chivalrous, because the axe and sword were knightly weapons of combat at the time. "*Distinction*" was the protective armour of aristocrats and snobs. The most important thing for the Aristocrats was to differentiate themselves from the despised commoners; and even to avoid dying in the same way as the disdained plebs whom they shamelessly parasitized. Then the equalizing *Revolution of 1789* granted all citizens the right to be beheaded thanks to Dr. Guillotin.

Among Christians, royal or ecclesiastical tribunals (and courts) were not limited to sentencing criminals to death. Judges and executioners, especially in English Canada, were very creative in making the sinner atone for and discouraging potential criminals: *branding* with a red-hot iron<sup>5</sup> or the *thirty-nine lashes*, in accordance with the Bible, which declared "*forty lashes minus one*"<sup>6</sup>, a method used until the 1960s throughout some Commonwealth countries. The punishment of the *pillory*<sup>7</sup> condemned the unfortunate man to be exposed in a public square where onlookers could insult him at will. In England, it even happened that the

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<sup>5</sup> In French, "marquage au fer rouge", abolished in 1802 except for homicides.

<sup>6</sup> Paul's Letter to the Corinthians! 1:24.

<sup>7</sup> An instrument of torture, made of wooden beams, sometimes on wheels, intended to expose criminals in chains to public vindictiveness.

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prisoner's ears were nailed to the beams that bound the captive. The pillory was abolished in Canada in 1842. Banishment, on the other hand, required the convict to leave Canada on pain of death.

As for women, the Ecclesiastical Courts traditionally preferred to condemn them to be burned, as their hanging bodies and dangling legs were deemed too suggestive for the imaginative minds of some males. In the same vein, nowadays, Islamic women, who are to be stoned according to the guidelines of the Qur'an, are sometimes buried up to their necks, so that through the disorderly movements of agony, they do not uncover any part of their bodies, which could be considered immodest by male stoners.



## CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IN CANADA A BRIEF HISTORY

In New France, the year 1608 was marked by the first capital execution. Locksmith Jean Duval was hanged at Quebec for plotting the assassination of Samuel de Champlain in order to deliver Quebec to the Spanish<sup>8</sup>. Duval was the first of the 118 people executed by the Justice System of New France between 1608 and 1760, an average of *0.77 executions per year*. Sixty years after this first execution, in 1668, Governor de Courcelles had three Frenchmen shot in the presence of Iroquois delegates gathered in

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<sup>8</sup> •As we know, Québec City was founded on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1608.

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Montreal. These Frenchmen had murdered six Amerindians of the Oneyut nation to steal pelts from them. If we add to these 118 executions the 176 under the English colonial regime (*1.7 executions per year*), and the 710 executions under the Canadian Confederation (*7 executions per year* on average), we get 1004 executions —including 26 women— in what is now Canada.

The total number of death sentences is nearly doubled, with one in two *death row inmates* executed. Of the 1,481 death sentences (including 50 women) during Confederation, 710 were carried out; 699 men and 11 women (including 4 Francophones). The 50 women sentenced to hang during Confederation had killed 79 victims. But most of their sentences were commuted to life imprisonment and only 11 were carried out. The crime of all the others went partially unpunished. Ironically, the Justice authorities hanged 36 of the 42 male accomplices who helped these Canadian women commit a bloody crime. In seven cases, the male accomplice was executed while the woman obtained a life-saving commutation. The average age of those executed in Quebec was 30 and a half years.

Half the motives for crime (of Canadian women) were matters of the heart. As a result, those who perpetrated bloody crimes always had male accomplices. It wasn't until 1986, our egalitarian times, that two women<sup>9</sup> murdered a third one in Toronto. Both criminals were sentenced to life imprisonment on December 19, 1987. They spent only 15 years behind bars.

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<sup>9</sup> •Marilyn Arneson, 34, and Donna Turner, 37. The victim was Marlene Collins, 34.

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Up to 1808, our criminal laws, copied from those of England, punished with death some two hundred crimes, misdemeanors, and trivial offences, such as frequenting gypsies for at least a month, or attempting suicide. The suicidal depressive had to be very careful not to fail his suicide attempt if he wanted to die voluntarily, because the Justice System helped him to do so in case of failure.

Between 1808 and 1861, the death penalty with various forms of torture punished serious crimes, such as murder, assassination, rape and ill-treatment of a girl under the age of ten, but also such minor offences as pickpocketing, poisoning, even if it was a failure, sodomy with a man or a beast, sacrilege on objects of piety, etc. the manufacture of counterfeit money, the illegal return from exile, signals to lure a ship to a dangerous place (shipwrecks), theft by a servant from his master's house... Anxious to abolish injustice, in 1861 the Canadian Parliament reduced capital punishment to murder, treason, and violent piracy. The maritime lobby added to this list the arson attack on Her Majesty's docks.

Whereas in the earliest times, judges and executioners went out of their way to invent elaborate tortures and inflict them on the condemned before hanging them, in the twentieth century the fear of providing justified arguments to the abolitionists of the death penalty pushed legislators to make the physical and moral suffering of the condemned as "acceptable" as possible.

One of the first acts of humanization of killing was to lengthen the rope of the gallows.

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- *The short jump*, with a rope of 30 to 60 cm, resulted in a very slow and painful death by strangulation and suffocation. This is why the executioner helped the tortured man to die by pulling him by the feet, hence his nickname of *boot-puller*.
- *The 120 to 150<sup>cm</sup>* rope jump also resulted in a relatively slow and painful death by strangulation.
- *The Long Jump* was a noticeable improvement in allowing for instant loss of consciousness. The length of the rope varied with the weight of the convict. A sufficiently long rope broke the neck, cervical vertebrae, and severed the spinal cord, causing immediate unconsciousness and rapid death in about ten minutes. A rope that was too long decapitated the condemned man. The length of the rope was calculated by the following formula: 1020 divided by the weight of the convict in pounds from which 14 was subtracted for the weight of the head. The quotient thus gave the length of the rope in feet.

But sometimes, serious mistakes were made, which on some occasions had important consequences.

For example, during the famous Blue Cap Crime case in Montreal, Tommasina Teolis was sentenced to death on March 29, 1935 for killing her husband. Tommasina awaited her execution in the women's prison on Fullum Street. The day before her death, she was transferred to Bordeaux prison to await the execution of her sentence. The 71-year-old executioner, Arthur English, was given the lucrative task of putting her to death. As usual, he consumed more alcohol than he could handle in order to forget his much-despised role. English had erected two scaffolds for the

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occasion in the courtyard of the prison : on one were to be hanged two convicts; the other was intended to receive successively Tommasina and then another criminal, Joseph Alisaro, who had murdered his fiancée. Legislators and judges in the Confederacy paid little attention to the number of executions at that time. But Alisaro's hanging was eventually postponed to a later date due to a delay in the Court of Appeals' decision. As a result, Arthur English hanged only three convicts that night.

Arriving at the penitentiary in Bordeaux (Montreal) in a very high state of alcohol, English wanted to weigh the convicts in order to calculate the length of rope needed using the formula explained above. He went to examine Donafrio and Gagliardi, but when he wanted to see Tommasina Teolis, in the women's quarters, he was refused, probably because of his advanced state of intoxication. The head warden simply handed him a note on which a guard had scribbled the weight of the convict found in her court file. The executioner calculated the length of the rope from this data.

Alcohol and mathematical calculations, as is well known, does not make a desirable mixture, and the first two executions, those of Gagliardi and the young Donafrio, were a failure. For, although it was planned that the shock would break their necks and cause them to lose consciousness instantly, the miscalculations killed the two condemned by simple strangulation.

Leaving the first scaffold, English went to Tommasina's cell to tie her arms and bring her to the gallows. However, when he entered her cell, English, whose senses were disturbed by the high alcoholic level of his blood, did not realize that the improved

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menus of death row inmates had greatly benefited Tommasina Teolis, whose initial 65kg had been transformed into 87kg. She had gained 22kg since entering prison. Unaware of the problem, English led the condemned woman to the gallows with a rope that was too long. And what had to happen happened: Tommasina's head was torn off and the audience was splattered with blood.

As a result of the scandal, this execution was the last of the English executioner's career. He was forced to retire in disgrace, for he was immediately boycotted by all the sheriffs of Canada. He died soon after of liver cirrhosis aggravated by despair.

In the end, the efforts of supporters of capital punishment could not prevent executions from being abolished altogether, despite polls showing that the population wanted to keep this last option for the most heinous crimes. The life imprisonment that was to replace it was immediately undermined by the abolitionists, who did not want to disarm, and largely undermined by increasingly complacent judges. Today, remissions of sentences for good behaviour and pardons for bad conduct mean that convicts "simply pass through, almost as tourists" our prison system, sometimes for inexpiable crimes such as those of pedophiles, whose recidivism makes the headlines.

Finally, capital punishment was fully repealed in our country in 1998 (again by mimicking the London government) for both civilians and the military personnel. It had been abolished in 1976 in civil and criminal trials, but Martial Courts had first insisted on retaining this sanction for high treason and insubordination.

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This book of true crime stories recounts the tragic fate of three Québécois females sentenced to death and executed in Quebec since the time of New France. The files presented in this book are those of Marie-Joseph Angélique (executed in 1734), Marie-Josephe Corriveau (1761) and Marie-Anne Crispin (in 1858). They are drawn from a variety of sources: newspaper articles of the time and more recent, criminal files from the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, historical works... This is the still little-known story of their crime, trial and execution.



*The final Swing*

*Revenge Destroys  
the one who seek it*

**Crime and exécution of**

**MARIE-JOSEPH ANGÉLIQUE**

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Canada's Black population has a higher education rate than the average for our country as a whole, regardless of races<sup>10</sup>. But there is no doubt that this was not always the case, especially in the days of slavery, when it was practically forbidden to teach slaves the *Three R's*<sup>11</sup>, in accordance with the rule that an ignorant community is easier to manipulate than an educated population.

Marie-Joseph Angélique had the distinction of being the only black slave executed in the time of New France. Which is not a very enviable distinction. However, another slave, an Amerindian woman named Marie-Anne, was hanged on 20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1756 at Quebec for stealing her master's property. The judges then took life for a few peccadilloes. Thus, on August 31, 1759, two French soldiers were hanged for having stolen a modest barrel of brandy from a certain Monsieur Charland in the Faubourg Saint-Roch.

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<sup>10</sup> •See Christensen and Weinfeld, 1993, p. 31 .

<sup>11</sup> •Reading, Writing and Arithmetic.

Before telling Marie-Joseph Angélique's sad fate, one may ask how the Christian nations of Europe, which at that time considered themselves to be the beneficiaries of a very advanced civilization, could justify the horrors of slavery.

The historian who is constantly wandering through the various clouds of civilizations that have covered a fragment of our planet at one time, knows that slavery has always existed, everywhere on earth. In the New World, Native Americans have always practiced slavery on a large scale. At the end of intertribal wars, prisoners were either tortured to death for the sake of the victors' distraction or enslaved. Some Indian nations (such as the Iroquois...) greatly appreciated a recreational activity that consisted of discovering the extent to which a man could remain impassive and indifferent to suffering and torture. Many died in this way without uttering the slightest complaint. On the other hand, a Indian woman without a husband could choose a prisoner-slave, who would thus become a free man once again, but a fully-fledged member of his wife's tribe. "*White Indians*" were Europeans saved from death and torture by marrying an Indian woman. They sometimes fought against their own nation of origin.

In Europe, the colonized territories provided the Greek and Roman empires with millions of slaves, mainly from Europe but also from Africa, so much so that the capitals, Athens and Rome, were home to enslaved populations ten times larger, numerically, than those of Greek and Roman citizens<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> •See Malet and Isaac, 1923, p. 289.

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During the bloody conflict that pitted Octavian and Antony against Brutus and Cassius, the city of Tarsus<sup>13</sup> declared itself in favor of the cause of the former. Which, in the first place, earned him the wrath of Cassius, and what rage! According to the Greek historian Appian, the city had to pay the "exorbitant sum" of 1,500 talents<sup>14</sup> and not only put all the city's property up for sale, but also sell a large part of its population as slaves<sup>15</sup>."

These masses of slaves of the Greek and Latin empires slowly dissolved into the local population, of which they became an integral part. As a result, it can be said that today's Italians and Greeks are the direct descendants of these slaves.

Elsewhere and throughout the Middle Ages, the serfdom of peasants in Europe for the benefit of lords was another form of slavery. The peasants were sold along with the farms and the land. They had no right of movement, and could be beaten or killed without the lord suffering the slightest reprisal.

Africa was no exception to this barbaric custom that defiled the other three continents. Wishing to stigmatize Canada for having also been the scene of slavery, historian Afua Cooper<sup>16</sup> simply forgets that at the same time, the richest social classes in Africa themselves used multitudes of slaves whose fate was as lamentable—if not more so—than that of the slaves of New France. The fact that Africa itself has been devoured by the same cancer does not make slavery any less shameful, of course. However, we must

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<sup>13</sup> •The birthplace of St. Paul, now in Turkey.

<sup>14</sup> •1 talent = 25.8 kg of silver.

<sup>15</sup> •Decaux, 2003, p. 19-20.

<sup>16</sup> •See Cooper, 2006.

guard against the Manichean temptation to see Good and Evil in black and white, respectively. Grey is the most common shade in all things. The world is more complex. There is no such thing as an absolute.

As everywhere else, the African bourgeoisie and the aristocratic and military hierarchy of each of the different empires (of Egypt, Songhai, Mali, Ghana, Kanem, etc.) which, at one time or another, dominated a part of this vast and beautiful continent, owned many slaves<sup>17</sup>. Since the eighth century, the Muslims of North Africa had been engaged in an intense slave trade across the Sahara desert<sup>18</sup>. A multitude of European slaves were also held in North Africa<sup>19</sup>. Davis estimates that, from 1530 to 1780, between 1,000,000 and 1,250,000 European Christians were enslaved by the Muslims of the Barbary Coast<sup>20</sup>. The mistreatment of white slaves was such that the death rate reached 20% per year; worse than anywhere else. When the French captured Algiers in 1830, they freed the last white slaves who were able to return to Italy, England and Spain. At the same time, the Arabian Peninsula was trading black slaves on the east coast of Africa from Zanzibar. Here too, it was only colonialism, which was so open to criticism, that put an end to this infinite evil. But the end of colonialism did not fail to reopen some wounds, as at the beginning of the twenty-

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<sup>17</sup> •See LeBris, 1989, pp. 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> •Ibid. Marie-Joseph Angélique

<sup>19</sup> •Those who would like to know more about this little-known subject can read with great interest Giles Milton's work, *White Gold; The Extraordinary Story of Thomas Pellow and North Africa's One Million European Slaves* (2004). The French title is *Captives in Barbary, The Extraordinary History of European Slaves in the Land of Islam*.

<sup>20</sup> •See Davis, 2003.

first century, black slavery has regained some vigour in regions such as Sudan and Mauritania.

Extremely famous people (sometimes considered holy in many religions) owned slaves. So, was the Bible people, such as Abraham, Jacob, King David, and others. Among the Muslims, the young Muhammad owned a slave<sup>21</sup>. The powerful Mohican (Mohawk) Iroquois chief Thayendanegea, better known by the nickname Joseph Brant, used his black slaves to build his luxurious Ontario residence near Burlington (in 1802)<sup>22</sup>.

As for France, England, Holy Roman Germanic Empire, and the other nations of Europe, besides the institution of peasant serfdom which was a real slavery in all its horror, their populations have always received crowds of slaves from the countries called Sclavonia or Slavonia, in Eastern Europe, whose name (Slavic) became, therefore, synonymous with slave. Such is the etymology of this word. In the High Middle Ages, these distant lands were neither organized nor Christianized, and it was easy for Western European countries to obtain supplies of slaves, both men and women. Since it was prohibited for Christians to enslave other Christians, Slavonia, which had not yet been Christianized, made it possible to avoid this pitfall.

The traffic from the Slavic countries was immense. It is said that the German prince Henry the Fowler (876-936) single-handedly reduced eight hundred thousand Slavs to enslavement! The

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<sup>21</sup> •Muhammad was a Quraîsh, the posthumous son of Abdullah and his widow Amina. He was not very wealthy: his only inheritance was a slave, five camels, and a few cattle (see Calmette, 1951, p. 17)

<sup>22</sup> •See Boyko, 1998, p. 159.

mythical Jewish empire of the Khazars (apogee in 850) is believed to have been founded by Slavs who feared slavery<sup>23</sup>. Slavonia thus has been, throughout History and until the nineteenth century, an inexhaustible reservoir of slaves for the Ottoman Empire, and Adolf Hitler planned to continue for a long time until the complete extinction of the Slavic race, which he catalogued as inferior in its insane classification.

In France, *serfdom* was officially abolished along with the privileges of the nobility and clergy on the famous night of August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1789: "*Any servile person who touches the land of France becomes free!*" Moreover, the oldest legislative act recorded which associates the name of France with the freedom, is *an Ordinance of 1315* in which the French King Louis X the Hutin proclaims: "We, considering that our kingdom is said and called the *Kingdom of the Franks*; and wanting *the thing to be in accord with the name*, have ordered that all servitude be reduced to the franchise<sup>24</sup>."

How did Christians come to terms with their consciences? In addition to the fact that slavery was common in the Bible, they simply invented a religious alibi that attempted to dehumanize the victims and manipulate consciences in order to justify the unjustifiable, the so-called *Curse of Cain*. Although the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis (1939-1945), the devastating famine among Irish Catholics (1845) by Queen Victoria's government, and black slavery by Muslims first and then by Christians, remain

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<sup>23</sup> •They are said to be the origin of Ashkenazi Jews from Europe, who, according to this theory, did not come from the diaspora originating in the Near East.

<sup>24</sup> •Pierre-Jacques Brillon et Antoine-François Prost de Royer, *Dictionnaire de jurisprudence et des arrêts*, Lyon, Aimé de la Roche, 1781-1788

undoubtedly the three worst misdeeds of modern times, the world was the scene of many other massacres. Exterminations and ethnic cleansing were no less atrocious. Not to mention the traditional hills of severed heads that Tamerlane (1336-1405) amused himself with erecting each time he took over a town, or the burning of villages in Scotland by English troops to drive out the Catholic populations under a false economic pretext (*Highland Clearances*, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries)<sup>25</sup>. This is something that some historians still modestly ignore.

But let's get back to that so-called *Curse of Cham (or Canaan)*. Biblical Genesis<sup>26</sup> tells us that after the Flood, Noah overindulged in alcoholic beverages. In a drunken state, he had laid down in his tent, where his son Cham had seen him naked and drunk and had the audacity to laugh at him by calling his brothers Sem and Japheth. The latter, far from smiling, had modestly covered their father's body without looking at him. After he had recovered his senses, old Noah had learned from the lips of the two informers about Cham's conduct. He had immediately disinherited him in favor of his snitching brothers, and banished him, burdening his exile with a curse that condemned him to become the slave of his brother Japheth, who represented the whites, and Shem, the traditional father of the Semites (Jews and Arabs).

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<sup>25</sup> •Let us not forget the extermination of the Armenians by the Turks or the Gypsies by the Nazis. On the ethnic cleansing of Upper Scotland, see *The Highland Clearances*, by John Prebble (1963).

<sup>26</sup> •In its chapter IX verse 20 (Genesis 9:19-21 25): "And Noah said, Cursed be Canaan! Let him be the last of the slaves to his brethren. 26. He also said, "Blessed be YHWH, the God of Sem, and may Canaan be his slave." 27. Let Elohim enlarge Japheth, and dwell in the tents of Sem, and let Canaan be his slave."

Thus, what was a simple matter of inheritance was going to be hijacked to justify slavery, because a certain racist tradition that was totally legendary made Cham the father of the black race. It was enough to assert (which the Bible does not do) that the blacks were the descendants of Cham to make Africa, as Eastern Europe had been until then, an inexhaustible reservoir of slaves for Muslims and Christians alike.

The largest influx of Black slaves arrived in Nova Scotia, which was not yet a Canadian province, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of English refugees driven from the United States<sup>27</sup>. These English Loyalists were severely persecuted by the Independentists at the time of the American Revolution. Each family brought its own slaves. All these English refugees first settled in Nova Scotia, where they occupied the farmlands cleared of their thick forests and enriched by the unfortunate Acadians, who had themselves been expelled shortly before by the English<sup>28</sup>. Those slaves built the fortifications of Halifax with ashlar from the demolished fortress of Louisbourg. Other English refugees went to occupy and clear the western part of the province of Quebec, which was eventually cut off to form the Province of Ontario.

In addition to the slaves who had arrived in Nova Scotia with the English refugees, 3,000 Black slaves, who had fought for England during the American Revolution under the promise of emancipation, were settled in Nova Scotia, where the British government had promised them large lands to be cleared (400 hectares

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<sup>27</sup> •Called Loyalists in the history of England.

<sup>28</sup> •See Krauter and Davis, 1978

or more), as was done for the white Loyalists<sup>29</sup>. The strategic goal of the British was to ruin the Americans' economy by inducing their slaves to run away. In the end, their promises were soon forgotten. Some 60% of the 3,000 surviving Black Loyalists received nothing at all. And the remaining 40 percent were allotted only small gardens of only half a hectare, half barren, in remote areas that the Loyalists had declined<sup>30</sup>.

British Loyalists, on the other hand, were able to choose their site, and some even went so far as to evict black families from their land that had been painstakingly cleared and to take it over without any compensation and without their protests being taken into consideration by the English colonial authorities<sup>31</sup>. To add insult to injury; it was even proposed to use black Loyalists to pay Americans ransoms for English prisoners held in the United States<sup>32</sup>.

Without any title deed, these poor people could not even sell their modest lot of land<sup>33</sup>. Again, this was a ruse, and they ended up living on public charity, forced to seek rare underpaid jobs. This did not improve the opinion of the white people of Halifax, who blamed the blacks for their inactivity, indifferent to the true reason. The victims were thus blamed by the perpetrators.

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<sup>29</sup> •*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> •See Lampkin, 198; Krauter and Davis; 1978 and even Davis, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> •Boyko, 1998, p. 159.

<sup>32</sup> •Walker, 1980.

<sup>33</sup> •Bolaria and Li, 1998.

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Curiously, Kings are often adorned with qualities of generous fairness, whereas they are the main beneficiaries and the primary profiteers of the unjust social system they keep in place. A brave black man, Thomas Peters, naively thought that the King George III, was to be made aware of biases and inequality of which some of his subjects were victims. In 1791 he went to London for this noble purpose. The King refused to receive him.

The *Sierra Leone Co.* decided to send freed slaves from Nova Scotia back to Africa, as the Americans did to *Liberia*; 1,200 Black Nova Scotians left for Freetown in 1792. But they soon realized that the British company wanted to run the new country (Sierra Leone) as a commercial enterprise that would bring its dividends. Revolts broke out against the over taxation of the inhabitants<sup>34</sup>.

When, in 1793, the authorities banned the slave trade in Ontario, they were careful not to cause losses to the powerful slave owners. This was done gradually. Slaves acquired before this prohibition were therefore not freed. Moreover, children born to slaves, even after this date, retained their status as slaves until the age of 25.

In 1796, 550 *maroon slaves*<sup>35</sup> from Jamaica, in a state of armed insurrection, were exiled to Nova Scotia for fear that they would join the French Republicans who were fighting to abolish slavery in the West Indies. It should be remembered that on February 4<sup>th</sup>,

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<sup>34</sup> •See Wyse, 1991. In the end, in both Sierra Leone and Liberia, the freed slaves formed a privileged social class that behaved as badly towards the local population as the Americans and English had behaved towards them in America.

<sup>35</sup> •Deserting Slave. The word "brown" comes from the Spanish "cimarrón", which means "to escape, to flee".

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1794, the French Revolutionary Government had abolished slavery throughout the French colonial territory. The British army, led by their pro-slavery lobbies, invaded the French colonies in order to re-establish slavery before the *desire for freedom* infected their own slaves<sup>36</sup>. Paradoxically, these 550 soldiers were integrated into the British armed forces and had to fight *for* the re-establishment of slavery against the French republican forces who were fighting *against* it.

The last wave of immigration occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the escape network known as "*The Underground Railroad*," which took fugitive slaves from the deep south of the United States to the Ontario peninsula. Approximately 30,000 runaway slaves arrived in Central Canada on this mythical train<sup>37</sup>.



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<sup>36</sup> •To end this war against the British, Bonaparte re-established slavery in the French colonies at the end of the eighteenth century, and repealed it again in 1814, in vain.

<sup>37</sup> •Krauter and Davis, 1978.

Marie-Joseph Angélique, a Portuguese black slave brought to Canada by malevolent fate, had the unfortunate privilege of being the only black slave to suffer the penalty of hanging in New France. However, 30 Black citizens were executed in Canada<sup>38</sup> from the beginning of colonization until the end of the twentieth century, but none had slave status except Angélique.

It is known that, for centuries, Portuguese slave traders were engaged in the African slave trade. Chronologically, they were the first Europeans to engage in this trade, which was unworthy of Christians. As a result, the Afro-Lusitanian interbreeding was great. Topasses such as the De Souza literally covered all the coasts of Africa, the East Indies, and Southeast Asia.

In addition to Angélique, four other women were executed during the time of New France. The first was a 16-year-old girl whose name has unfortunately not been remembered in history. She was hanged at Quebec in 1649 for simple theft.

The second woman, 43-year-old Gilette Bonne, was executed on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1672 for beating her son-in-law to death. The crime was perpetrated on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1672, at Trois-Rivières. Gilette and her husband Jacques Bertault murdered their son-in-law Julien de Latouche, in the presence of their daughter Isabelle de Latouche,

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<sup>38</sup> •Eleven in Ontario, seven in Nova Scotia, four in British Columbia, two in Alberta, two in New Brunswick, two in Prince Edward Island, and finally two in Quebec, including Marie-Joseph Angélique and the American William Campbell, who was hanged on January 24, 1914, in Montreal, for having slit the throat of George Muir, on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1913. Cincinnati police were also looking for Campbell for the murder of two women. This was the first execution in the new Bordeaux prison.

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the victim's wife. De Latouche was an abusive, nasty, and incompetent husband. The Bertault family tried unsuccessfully to poison him. The devil himself seemed to be protecting the bully. Then, the parents-in-law decided to take the bull by the horns to deliver their daughter from this lamentable marriage, legally indissoluble. While some of them were immobilizing him, Gilette, with his pre-destined name, slashed his face and skull with great blows of a hoe. After that, the loving family threw the lifeless body into the river.

For this crime, Gilette was sentenced to be hanged and her husband Jacques to be beaten up, that is to say, tied to a wheel and beaten to death (*roué*) with a metal or wooden bar. In the end, the *Conseil Souverain*<sup>39</sup> decided that the wheel would not be administered to him until after the hanging, which *de facto* brought the husband's punishment into line with that of his wife. Their daughter, on the other hand, was condemned only to see her parents perish.

On November 17<sup>th</sup> of the same year, 1672, another woman, Françoise Duverger, was hanged for murdering her husband Simon Galbrun and aborting several children.

The last two women executed in New France were slaves; one African and the other Amerindian. The first, Marie-Joseph Angélique, died on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1734 in Montreal. The other, Marie-Anne, an Amerindian slave, was hanged on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1756 at Quebec, for stealing objects from her master's house. In Europe,

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<sup>39</sup> •Or Supreme Court of New France.

moreover, theft perpetrated by a servant at his master's house was also punishable by death, at the time.

Marie-Joseph Angélique, the unfortunate heroine of this chapter, was born in the Portuguese archipelago of Madeira about 1705-1710. Afua Cooper, Angélique's Jamaican biographer, who brought her out of anonymity, is of the opinion that she was not born a slave, but was kidnapped and enslaved by Portuguese slave traders. In any event, she was then brought to New York by a Dutchman, Nicholas Bleecker, who sold her in 1725 to François Poulin de Francheville, a wealthy Montreal fur trader.

Afua Cooper estimates the total number of slaves in New France at a total of 1,200 during the year 1734. This number may seem exaggerated when compared to the figures of the great scholar of Canadian history, researcher Marcel Trudel, who counted 4,185 slaves in Quebec in almost two centuries, between the second half of the seventeenth century and the year 1834. Of these, three-quarters were of Native American descent<sup>40,31</sup> and only one-quarter of African descent.

More conservatively, the number of black slaves can therefore be estimated at about 300, including 150 in Montreal, at the time of the tragic episode of Marie-Joseph Angélique. The absence of plantations in Canada meant that slavery slaves in our country did not have the same resonance as in the West Indies. Unlike New England slaves, who were mostly used in an agricultural context, New France slaves served as residential personnel in urban areas,

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<sup>40</sup> •Especially from the Panis Nation, so much so that an Indian slave was simply called a panis.

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particularly in Montreal. However, a lower number than that put forward by Cooper is no less ignominious.

Angélique remained a slave during her nine-year stay in Canada, from her arrival (1725) until her death (1734). She was baptized on 28 June 1730 in Montreal, which seems to indicate that she had been a slave in Portugal since she was not Christianized.

At that time, Marie-Joseph's friend was César, a black slave belonging to Ignace Gamelin, with whom she had a son in January

1731 and twins in May 1732. She also had an affair with a white man with whom she had three other children.



Illustration of Thérèse de Couagne, widow of François Poulin de Francheville, by artist Karl Dupéré-Richer for the educational project Enquête en Nouvelle-France.

By 1734, the terrible infant mortality of the time had already taken the lives of all Angélique's children. François Poulin de Francheville also died. His 36-year-old widow, Thérèse de Couagne de Francheville, became the legal owner of her husband's property. But the aristocrat found it increasingly difficult to get Marie-Joseph to obey her. Her arrogant and assertive personality lacked any spirit of obedience. It was probably for this reason that

Madame de Francheville decided to hand the recalcitrant girls<sup>41</sup> over to ,) over to a more authoritative person. Marie-Joseph openly expressed her hatred of slavery —which is easy to understand from the point of view of an unpaid slave— and also, according to her biographer Afua Cooper, she also voiced her acrimony towards the whites in general<sup>42</sup>.

Marie-Joseph Angélique soon had good reason to believe that Madame de Francheville had found a serious purchaser. In fact, the young woman learned that on February 22<sup>nd</sup> the documents for her sale had been signed to an official civil servant of the colonial Government of Quebec, François Étienne Cugnet. The price of the transaction was set at "*600 pounds of gunpowder.*" The girl's transfer would take place in the coming weeks.

This time there was panic in the mind of Marie-Joseph, who was unwilling to fall under the authority of a more exacting landlord than the gentle lady of Couagne de Francheville, whom she could defie without danger, like a teenager challenges her mother.

At that time, the young slave had fallen in love, as we have said above, with a white chap named Claude Thibault. He was an *indentured servant* who was planning to break the ban. He wanted to run away. The indentured-servant system allowed young Europeans to come and settle in New France or New England. But in return, they owed five years of back-breaking work to their employer, who had paid for their travel expenses. While waiting for the debt to be paid off by the fruits of their labor, the lives of these

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<sup>41</sup> •of whom she was afraid.

<sup>42</sup> •Without giving her sources for this detail.

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indentured servants and their social status were strangely similar to the life of a slave. That's why they combined their solitude to stimulate their dreams of escape

Both decided to flee to New England or New York, and then, perhaps, to Portugal, the country of Marie-Joseph's childhood, which, for this reason, had retained in the young woman's mind the flavour of a land of plenty, a country of milk and honey.

Unfortunately, the fugitive lovers were captured after two brief weeks of freedom. Marie-Joseph Angélique was returned to Madame de Francheville. Thibault, who had been imprisoned not only for breaking his own contract of *indentured servitude* but also for facilitating the escape of a person with the status of a slave. Released on April 8<sup>th</sup>, the young man immediately returned to see his girlfriend and they decided somewhat prematurely to flee again two days later. Time was of the essence.

Afua Cooper seems determined to deny the slave's love for the young white man, while even under torture, Marie-Joseph confessed to being the arsonist but courageously denied her friend's complicity in the burning of the city. Cooper speculates that the young woman planned to abandon her lover and continue alone to Portugal, fleeing with him simply to slip through the cracks of the slave net more easily. This seems unlikely given the enslavement Marie-Joseph had suffered in Portugal a few years earlier.

The night of April 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>, 1734, was set as the new date for the escape. Unfortunately for her, either in order to cover up their flight, or more likely to take unnecessary revenge on her mistress, Marie-Joseph decided to set fire to the Francheville's

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bourgeois residence located on Rue Saint-Paul. Traditionally, across the Americas, burning was a very common revenge among slaves who rejected their unjust fate. It was, however, a folly that was to drive Marie-Joseph to the gallows. Is it not said that hatred and the spirit of revenge always poison those who cultivate these venomous flowers in their minds? "Revenge destroys the one who harbours it," Hélène Brodeur rightly wrote<sup>43</sup>; and the Algerian novelist Yasmina Khadra (*L'écrivain*, 2001) observes: "Hatred is the most wicked of concubines; it drapes your bed with nettles, fills your pillows with insomnia, takes advantage of your drowsiness to seize control of your mind; time to pull yourself together, and you're already in purgatory."



Representation of Marie-Joseph Angélique in Montreal's Mile-end neighborhood. (CUM)

According to her own confession – it is true, snatched under torture and therefore without any testimonial value by the standards of the twenty-first century – Marie-Joseph placed a stove under the wooden roof and waited a moment to make sure that the fire was catching. Because during her previous escape with Claude, her attempt to set fire to the

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<sup>43</sup> •Hélène Brodeur is a teacher, journalist, writer and freelancer. She was born in the Eastern Townships. She is the author of the *Chroniques du Nouvel-Ontario* and numerous are her historical novels.

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house of Sieur Monière, cousin of the Franchevilles, had failed. The failure of her act of arsonism had saved her life since she had been immediately reinstated in her duties and had not had to suffer the punishment reserved for arsonists. But her unquenchable desire for vengeance against her mistress was to be fatal to her after this second attempt, especially as a neighbour spotted her in the Rue Saint-Paul, keeping a close eye on a spot on the roof which soon began to smoke and then burn, before the imprudent woman could think of fleeing.

In a few minutes his mistress's large, beautiful wooden house began to blaze like a pyre. Thibault, for his part, had already wandered off and was probably waiting for his sweetheart at a designated location outside Montreal's fortifications. So, when the soldiers on the lookout were alerted and closed the city gates, the young man was not captured in the urban mousetrap. He was never seen again. Marie-Joseph, who was more easily spotted and had lingered to make sure that the fire would be more effective this time, was immediately arrested and incarcerated.

The blaze quickly spiraled out of control and much of the town, which was still a small settlement, was engulfed in flames, as was the great Hôtel-Dieu, a hospital that had burned for the third time since its founding, less than a century earlier. The disaster was immense for the city and its inhabitants, panic was widespread.

Angélique's immediate incarceration protected her from the reprisals of Montrealers, who had been thrown out on the street by the disappearance of their homes. It must be acknowledged that the authorities did not allow themselves to be won over by popular anger to the point of losing sight of the individual right to

an impartial defense. Canadian magistrates remained exemplary in the administration of Justice.

To claim, as Afua Cooper does, that the authorities simply wanted to make an example, and thereby convicted Marie-Joseph without serious reason, is far from the truth when one compares the treatment of her case with that of citizens who did not have slave status. Admittedly, the very publicity of capital executions was motivated by its *exemplary nature*, but as far as the procedure itself is concerned, it can be considered quite acceptable at the time. On the other hand, if we compare his trial with a modern procedure, there is a certain lack of rigour, not to mention of course the use of torture to extract confessions, as was done at the time. But to claim that justice was sacrificed because of the girl's slave status is arbitrary and untrue.

How many criminals have been tortured for simple unproven thefts, such as Michel Gaillon?<sup>44</sup> He was the first convict executed in Canada by an even more expeditious justice system? Just as the author Pauline Cadieux denied *a priori* the crime of Cordélia Viau simply because she was a woman<sup>45</sup>, Afua Cooper seems to deny Marie-Joseph's guilt, and justify her crime because she was of African descent. In any case, this is the impression inspired by her polemical work.

The magistrates first recorded the full account of her life. The accused answered all the questions without resistance, but

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<sup>44</sup> •September 1542, in Cap-Rouge,

<sup>45</sup> •See *Crimes & Punishments of Canadian Women*, Book ONE, same author, Chapter 2, ISBN : 978-1-387-74433-6, : *The deadly ménage-à-trois, The Cordélia-Viau-Poirier murder case, 1899*, page 51 ff.

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stubbornly refused to admit her guilt in the burning of the city. She was well aware that such a crime would always carry the death penalty. Over the course of several weeks of trial, Montreal Justice Pierre Raimbault found Marie-Joseph guilty, not on a confession she had refused to make, but on evidence, or rather clues that now seem circumstantial: of the twenty witnesses, none had seen him commit his crime.

On June 4, the young woman was sentenced to make amends, to have her right hand (the one that was supposed to have set the fire) cut off, in accordance with the biblical directive that commands: "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." Then, the condemned woman was to be burned alive, in response to the anger of the population who found themselves homeless.

Regarding the amputation of the hand, the case of Marie-Joseph Angélique was no exception. In June 1663, the notary Jacques Gourdeau de Beaulieu and his valet having been murdered by another valet, Nicolas Duval, in the seigneurial manor on the Isle-d'Orléans, the murderer was condemned in the name of the same religious precept to have both hands amputated, then to be hanged, and finally, for good measure, to be burned in the public square, on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1663.

In the case of Marie-Joseph Angélique, Fouché, the King's Procurator in New France, appealed by himself to the High Council against the judge's sentence (his own sentence), as Criminal Procedure stipulated should be done in all cases of capital punishment. The *Conseil supérieur* (High Council) was the highest Court of Appeal in New France; it was based in Quebec. The Justice system in New France scrupulously followed the rules of the

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Coutume de Paris applied here, so far from the Old World, whereas at the same time, a slave who set fire to half a town in New England would have been simply lynched by the angry populace.



In Quebec, the Court of Appeal of Nouvelle-France decided to moderate the magnitude of the sentence imposed: not only would her hand not be amputated, but the condemned woman would simply be hung by the neck until death ensued and not burned alive as had been decided in the first instance. Only the corpse would then be symbolically consigned to the flames. These changes were not intended to remove suffering, which was an integral part of the sentence, but to use torture for utilitarian purposes. The executioner should subject Marie-Joseph to torture in order to extract from her, of course, the confession of her crime, but *above all* the complicity of her boyfriend Claude Thibault. Torture would no longer be merely *punitive*; it would *become inquisitive*.

Marie-Joseph Angélique had to be brought back to Montreal to be executed. In order to find Claude Thibault, research posters and wanted placards were put up in the three major cities of New France, Québec, Montréal, and Trois-Rivières. Mathieu Léveillé,

the "Executor of the High Works," more commonly known as "the executioner," followed Angélique. He also returned to Montreal.

On June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1734, the day of the birth of the summer solstice, at seven o'clock in the morning, the judge of Montreal, Pierre Raimbault, and the assessor Charles-René Gaudron de Chèvremont, a notary by profession, went to the Marie-Joseph Angélique prison to have the young lady hear the final sentence which would be immediately followed by the execution of the death sentence. The two magistrates were accompanied by the clerk, Claude-Cyprien-Jacques Porlier, Joseph Benoît (barber-surgeon at the Hôtel-Dieu hospital, destroyed by the conflagration) and Mathieu Léveillé, the Executioner, who also had the particularity of being a black slave. Four soldiers from the City Watch escorted these gentlemen in order to ensure their safety and therefore the serenity of Justice. The prison chaplain, Father Navetier, was a Sulpician in charge of administering the *Last Rites*<sup>46</sup> to the condemned female before her execution, which, according to the barbaric tradition of the time, was to follow immediately after the torture session.

Afua Cooper suggests that the *Last Rites* should be administered in case the torture proved too harsh and took the life of the condemned woman. But this is not the case. Torture was an integral part of the punishment, whether or not any confession had to be extracted from the convicts. In the first judgment, torture was the amputation of the hand and death by fire. It had been

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<sup>46</sup> •The Last Rites was the Ultimum Viaticum: Holy Communion administered to someone who is dying, after the ritual prayers of Commendation of the Dying, and before the Prayers for the Dead; which must be cruel for someone still alive.

replaced, in the second, by the *Ordinary and Extraordinary Question*. But the suffering caused by torture was in no way to take the lives of the condemned, because the hanging had absolutely to take place in due form until death ensued, to obey the law.

The jailer Marchand immediately ushered in all these beautiful people. They seated themselves on chairs and stools. After which he ushered 29-year-old Angélique into the room where the executioner Léveillé was to torture the young woman.

—*On your knees!*" the judge ordered.

The clerk, Claude-Cyprien-Jacques Porlier, then read the new sentence of the Court of Appeal of Nouvelle-France:

—*Marie-Joseph Angélique, you are sentenced to make amends, then be hanged and strangled to death. After which, your body will be hoisted to a gibbet that will be erected for this purpose. Your body will then be burned and consumed by fire. But before all this, you will be subjected to the Ordinary and Extraordinary Question for the purpose of extracting from you the names of your accomplices*<sup>47</sup>.

It is easy to imagine that the prospect of this program must have terrified poor Marie-Joseph. However, it is indeniably true that this judgement was ultimately less cruel than the sentence of the Montreal Court which had sentenced her to have her hand amputated and to be burned alive. The day promised to be a most execrable one for the poor woman. The executioner was busily

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<sup>47</sup> •The archives of this trial are available on the website "Torture and the Truth. Angélique et l'incendie de Montréal", The Great Mysteries of Canadian History, accessed April 2011.

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preparing to administer the *Ordinary and Extraordinary Question* to her. To make amends was simply to ask forgiveness from God and her fellow citizens for her crime.

Judge Pierre Raimbault, who was responsible for selecting the type of torture, chose the cruel brodequins, widely used in Europe at the time, and dating back to the most distant medieval barbarism. He had several tortures to choose from. In the "Question with Water", for example, "*the questionnaire*" (that is, the executioner who carried out this sad task) took in one hand a hollowed-out ox horn as a funnel, and in the other he poured water into the flared part of the horn, the tip of which was plunged deep into the throat of the condemned person. The latter had to swallow two liters for the ordinary question, and two more liters for the extraordinary; approximately four liters of water. A barber-surgeon carefully monitored the pulse of the tortured person and had the torture temporarily interrupted as soon as he perceived a danger to the life of the condemned person, since it was necessary to keep him alive in order to inflict the entire sentence. Questions were asked between each half liter.

The brodequins, on the other hand, were mainly inflicted on condemned inmates who were to die by hanging immediately afterwards, as such treatment generally rendered the subject crippled.

Léveillé had Marie-Joseph sit on a backless chair nicknamed *the stool of repentance*<sup>48</sup>. In front of her, lay some instruments of torture: wedges of iron and wood, mallets, hammers, screws,

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<sup>48</sup> •Or expiation, or atonement.

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wooden *brodequins* to crush the lower limbs, as well as metal pincers, which, heated red, were to tear off pieces of flesh. It was certainly an ensemble to move the most phlegmatic natures, and we may be assured that Marie-Joseph cast terrified glances upon all these instruments of suffering.

At first, Léveillé tied Marie-Joseph's hands behind her back. Then he straightened the legs of the condemned female<sup>49</sup>, who was seated on the stool, into a very upright position. This done, he placed two planks on both sides of each leg, one on the inside, the other on the outside. He crammed them against the leg, binding them below the knee and above the ankles. Then Léveillé squeezed the two planked-legs together and tied them tightly with ropes placed at the same level as the other strings. This done, he forcefully inserted a wedge between the two inner planks: one wedge at the top at knee level, and one at the bottom at ankle level. By hammering in the wedges, he compressed the bony parts of the legs and caused the bones and cartilage to crack.

The *Ordinary Question* had four corners of metal or wood, to which were added four more for the *Extraordinary Question*. The pressure of the planks on the knees and ankles was intense. The judge would ask a question and if the answer was not what he wanted, he would order the executioner to increase the pressure on the legs by giving one or several blows with a mallet on one of the wedges.

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<sup>49</sup> •Only the tibia-fibula section was in upright position. It was on this section that the brodequins were applied.

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—Tell us your name, age, origin, status, and domicile, the judge ordered.

—Marie-Joseph Angélique... I am 29 years old. I was born in Portugal. I belong to the widow Francheville. I lived with her until the fire.

—Why did you set fire to the house?

—It's not me!

The judge made a sign to the executioner, Léveillé, who inserted a first iron wedge with a mallet.

—You're killing me with pain, she said simply, grimacing in pain. Yes, I was the one who set the fire!

She confessed to setting it on fire with a small stove. She had placed it under the roof, then she had gone outside, and a neighbor had spotted her as she watched the shingles until the flames broke through.

—Who helped you?

—No one helped me. I was the only one who set the fire.

The judge made a sign, and the executioner placed a second wedge; The young woman screams.

—Who advised you to set fire to your house?

—No one.

—Who helped you?

—No one, the girl replied tirelessly between each cry of pain.

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Then she began to shout:

*—It's me alone and no one else! Hang me right now. It's me alone. No one pushed me or helped me! Let me die, sir.*

Léveillé, the executioner, drove another corner:

*—I was the only one who did that. Hang me! That's all!*

Finally, a fourth wedge put an end to the Ordinary Question:

*—I'm telling you that I was the one who set the fire... All alone... With a stove under the roof, I had the bad idea all by myself! Hang me!*

In total silence from the audience, the executioner began to drive the first wedge of the Extraordinary Question. Very quickly the young woman's knees and ankles cracked under the blows of the oak mallet.

*—I don't have an accomplice. It's me alone, sir. I want to die!* she screamed.

Marie-Joseph Angélique showed an absolutely superhuman fortitude. Nothing could induce her to confess that her dear friend had helped her. Isn't that love? She knew that the mere admission of her friend's involvement would put an end to her own suffering. She preferred to endure hell rather than unjustly denounce the man she loved; even to put an end to these unbearable and ignoble torments. Very few human beings would have had this endurance and fortitude.

*—I was alone!* she screamed, amid exclamations of pain.

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The woman's screams echoed throughout the prison and even into the surrounding streets.

The judge had therefore failed getting her to confess Claude Thibault's involvement. The torture stopped. The executioner laid the young woman on the ground to remove the *boots of horror*. He carefully untied the planks that encircled the bloodied legs, crushed ankles, and broken knees. The executioner's *sixty-four blows* of the mallet (eight blows on each of the eight iron wedges) of the Ordinary and Extraordinary Question, had transformed Marie-Joseph into a veritable cripple. She could no longer stand without help and terrible suffering.

Three o'clock struck in the parish steeple of the church of Notre-Dame. The torture was over. It was time to die. But the young woman had managed to save her dear Claude, and it was likely, thanks to her sacrifice, that he would escape a punishment that he probably did not deserve.

The fact that she confessed her own guilt under torture —such a confession extracted under duress would have no testimonial value today— did not in the past limit the scope of the confession, because torture was in some way considered a Judgment of God. The average person and the judges thought —or pretended to think— that God gave the innocent the strength to resist suffering and proclaim their innocence. In the Bible, doesn't Psalm 22 provide an exemplary picture of the innocent persecuted by the wickedness of men and set free by God?

*"Sufferings and Hopes of the Righteous: And I am a worm and not a man, the reproach of men and the despised of the people."*

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(22:7) "Command thyself to the Lord! The Lord will save you. He will deliver you, because he loves you!" (22:9) "And you. O Lord, do not depart. You, who are my strength, come to my aid in haste!" (22:20) "Protect my soul from the sword, my life from the power of dogs!" (22:21) "Save me from the lion's mouth. Deliver me from the horns of the ox! (22:22)"

So, to declare that she was found guilty on circumstantial evidence is a reality of today, but to invoke her in 1734 is anachronistic.

At half-past five o'clock the chaplain, Father Navetier, confessed her and administered extreme unction, for it was time to die. The surgeon-barber Joseph Benoît made her absorb a comforting beverage, so that she would have the strength to go through the last stations of her *Way of the Cross*. The executioner dressed her in a long white tunic<sup>50</sup> that covered her broken knees. It was not necessary that a woman's body should be able to give bad thoughts to the spectators, but only the desire to behave well by not committing any crime. A sign read on the front and back of the long shirt: **INCENDIARY**.

The executioner hoisted the young woman onto the municipal cart, which was used for death row inmates as well as for transporting food or municipal waste. Barefoot, for her ankles would not have been able to support the slightest shoe anyway, Marie-Joseph Angélique sat on the back bench of the horse-drawn cart. She was facing backwards, with her back to the horse. The

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<sup>50</sup> •A kind of Islamic abaya with the same purpose: to hide women's legs and curves to prevent devious men from being tempted.

### *The final Swing*

executioner lit a torch weighing no more than a kilo and passed it to the condemned woman who had to brandish it in her right hand, the one who was presumed to have set the fire. The flames, of course, symbolized her crime of arson.

Léveillé, seated at the front of the cart, whipped the horse, which immediately shook itself. The four soldiers on the lookout flanked the condemned woman to prevent the crowd, massed all along the streets, and made up mostly of homeless victims of the arsonist, from taking revenge by beating her. Two of the four guards were seated on the condemned woman's bench, facing backwards on either side, and two others were walking along the tailboard.

The cart moved away from the prison on Notre-Dame Street and towards the church of the same name, which adorned the city's Place d'Armes with its graceful steeple. They halted in front of the church, and the two walking soldiers carried the condemned woman, whose legs were badly damaged, to the forecourt, in front of the door, where she was expected to make amends. The condemned woman, with a thick rope of tortouses<sup>51</sup> around her neck, had to kneel in front of the church and ask forgiveness of the King, of God, and of her fellow-citizens whose houses and hospital she had burned. One can imagine the excruciating pain that must have gripped her as she knelt on her painful, partially broken limbs. Her legs were in very bad shape and her feet, bare and covered in blood, could no longer support her. At

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<sup>51</sup> •The tortouses or tortouses (feminine plural in French) are a large hanging rope, which was formed of small strings twisted together, hence its name (according to The Royal Dictionary: French & English. English & French).

Léveillé's request, she cried out three times in a loud and intelligible voice:

*"I was wrong and ill-advised to commit this crime. I repent and ask forgiveness of God, the King, and Justice."*

The cart continued eastward into Rue Notre Dame, then turned right, due south, into Rue Bonsecours, and finally westward into Rue St. Paul. The judicial authorities were anxious to show the condemned woman the quarters she had burned down and devastated in an attempt to take revenge on her mistress. Everything was charred; forty-six houses, as well as the Hôtel-Dieu hospital, of which there was nothing left to help the sick and destitute of the Upper St. Lawrence. Incidentally, it was there that Marie-Joseph had met and loved Private Latreille, one of her friends from the past. She may have had a fleeting memory of it...

On either side of the streets, the crowd was packed, dense. Some of them were silent, signing themselves as if they saw a witch appearing. How could one set fire to so many houses without being an evil demon? they had to think. How can one enslave a human being without being an evil demon? she could have replied. Some onlookers, presumably those who found themselves homeless, screamed their hatred and blasphemed. Others spat in her direction, careful not to hit one of the soldiers on the lookout who flanked her on the bench.

She passed the burnt house of her mistress, Thérèse de Couagne de Francheville. No doubt she wept when she realized the evil she had made to herself, the evil she had created around her and especially her unjust destiny as a slave. It was a wretched

and sinister time. Why, then, had it been necessary for her fellow humans beings, to appropriate her life and her freedom in order to force her to work in their stead? And this is because of a banal epidermal tint different from that of her fellow citizens. We can guess her revolt. We also understand her desire to flee lands that are so inhospitable to her. As luck would have it, she lost control of her vengeance, for revenge is a snake that always bites the one who thinks he has mastered it.

A brand-new scaffold sprang up at the sight of the condemned woman, right against the Rue Saint-Paul. This was not the usual site for executions. They usually took place in the Market Square at the corner of Rue Saint-Paul and Place Royale in Montreal. But here's the thing: in order to show this woman the evil she had made in the community, the gallows had been erected by the executioner in the middle of the burnt district. A clearing had been organized adjacent to Rue Saint-Paul, just across from the charred remains of the Francheville residence.

It was Monday. The population had come out in multitudes to witness the execution. Hangings of women were extremely rare and the curious even more numerous. The cart and its escort halted at the foot of the gallows, against which was leaned a ladder solidly attached by its top rung to the horizontal beam of the gallows. The executioner Léveillé climbed the first rungs backwards. The guards took Marie-Joseph out of the cart and placed her in front of the executioner on the second or third rung of the ladder. Her hands were tied behind her back and a big noose (the tortouses) around her neck. Léveillé held her in place by grasping the tortouses with one hand.

While the chaplain urged the young woman to die well and to prepare to appear before God, imploring divine forgiveness for her crime, Léveillé took advantage of the distraction created by the priest's sermon to quickly fasten the other end of the big noose to the horizontal beam of the gallows. And so, as soon as the confessor had finished his admonition to repentance, Léveillé struck a powerful blow of his knee and a hook of his foot, to push Marie-Joseph's poor weakened legs into the void. She suddenly found herself hanging at the end of the rope and stirred in a panic.

Then Léveillé carried out the part of the sentence which provided that "Marie-Joseph should be strangled." He grasped with both hands the horizontal beam of the gallows on each side of the rope, placed his feet, as in a stirrup, on the hands of the dying woman, which were firmly fastened behind her back, and then, by impressing all his weight on the body of the tortured woman, hastened her death and shortened her horrible agony. Her head was thrown back on her side, her tongue expelled from the mouth and violent convulsions left the crowd of spectators petrified with horror.

Most of the executioners demonstrated by these macabre gymnastics that they were concerned with compassion and humanity by shortening as much as possible the suffering of the condemned person, as ordered by the judicial sentence. Sometimes, when the judges had not expressly recommended it, the family of the punished man discreetly bribed the executioner to shorten the suffering. Some executioners preferred to pull down on the hanged man's legs to hasten the agony, hence, as we have already mentioned, the nickname of *boot-pullers* which was sometimes

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bestowed upon them by the people, whose laughter and irony were only the antidotes to their misery.

The clock of the Sulpician Seminary scattered five sad rings in the charming sky of that first day of summer. As if in response, the bells of Notre-Dame rang out the knell to announce that Marie-Joseph had just left this land of misery and returned to God the soul he had entrusted to her twenty-nine years earlier. The body of the tortured woman hung for two hours on the gallows to allow any breath of life that might cling desperately to the mutilated body to leave it before cremation, and also to serve as a deterrent to the entire population.

At 7 p.m., Léveillé cut the *tortouses* one after the other and placed the broken corpse on a pyre erected next to it. When night fell, the flames continued to stir the darkness with their orange and yellow hues and a thousand menacing shadows. In the early morning, when the flames had also breathed their last, the cooled ashes of the unfortunate woman, intimately mingled with those of the burned pyre, were scattered to the four winds of the compass rose. Then the clerk Claude-Cyprien-Jacques Porlier wrote an account of this painful execution:

*"In the year 1743, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the present judgment was read by me, the undersigned clerk, in the prison, to the accused, and after the Sacrament of Confession was administered by Monsieur Navetier, priest of the seminary of Saint-Sulpice, Marie-Joseph was taken in charge by the Executor of High Justice, who conducted her to the door of the parish church of her city, where she made amends with the torch in her hand. After which, she was brought by the said executioner*

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*to an unoccupied place in front of the burnt house, where she was hanged and strangled, and then thrown into the fire, and her ashes were thrown into the wind, according to the verdict decided."*

Cooper wanted to portray Marie-Joseph Angélique as a heroine who was a victim of injustice. She wrote (2006):

*"Angélique fought in a losing battle. But somehow, she was exonerated. The bottom line is that this woman resisted oppression."*

Angélique was undoubtedly a victim for being enslaved, but presumably not for her crime of arson. Cooper even proposed the erection of a mausoleum in her memory, nearly three centuries after this dark event. Why not ask Wilbert Coffin, who was hanged in 1956 when he was innocent, for his opinion? Let's also ask the twelve Patriots of 1837, who were unjustly executed in the *Aupied-du-Courant prison* for having fought against oppression. And also the first-ever man executed under the British regime, hanged in Kingston (Ontario), in 1788 on the frivolous charge of stealing a watch (the real culprit was found shortly after his death). We should also ask the Irishman David McLane, who was hanged, then beheaded, disemboweled, and finally eviscerated by the English judicial authorities on 21 July 1797 in Montreal on a charge of treason for the benefit of the American insurgents. Is there a single human being who does not deserve a mausoleum for the suffering he has endured during his life? Because life is not a garden of roses and every human being is a slave to his employers, his family, his entourage (husband or wife), his work, health, drugs, poverty or, worse, wealth... in a word, of all the components of life.

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Thus died Angélique, the only black slave condemned to death according to the Royal Custom of Paris and executed in New France. Fado singers intone sad songs inspired by the melodies of the African slaves of Brazil and the black Moors of Portugal, who once lamented their horrible fate. They are desolate laments, hymns to misfortune, like the Andalusian flamenco sung by the Spanish soldiers exiled in Flanders, or the Russian ballads of the boatmen of the Volga.

Revenge is merciless to the one who indulges in it, for, as a wise proverb says, "*it is quite true that he who contemplates revenge must dig two graves, one for his victim and the other for himself.*"



*The final Swing*

## LA CORRIVEAU, REALITY AND LEGEND

### EXECUTION OF MARIE-JOSEPHTE CORRIVEAU

If you ever stroll past the Cégep de Lévis-Lauzon, think that two and a half centuries ago, this place was the crossroads of the great roads of Acadia and Beauce. There was exposed in an iron cage<sup>52</sup> the lifeless body of Marie-Josephte Corriveau, whom the population of New France contemptuously called "La Corriveau". She had been hanged some time before, on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1763, on a gallows erected on top of the Buttes-à-Nepveu, on the Plains of Abraham, on the very spot where the magnificent Second Empire-style parliament of Quebec struts proudly over the Old Capital. *Parliament Hill* was once known as *the hill of criminal executions*. Could this be a symbol?

Marie-Josephte's body was then locked up in an iron cage which the executioner went to hang in Aubigny, the ancient name of Lévis<sup>53</sup> at the crossroads of the two great roads that came from the south and west. In this way, travellers could see with their own eyes what is happening to criminals.

Marie-Josephte had committed her crimes at Saint-Vallier-de-Bellechasse, and the English criminal justice system —since Marie-

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<sup>52</sup> •The word *metal harness* would be more appropriate than *cage*.

<sup>53</sup> •The town of Aubigny was renamed Lévis in 1861, in honour of General Lévis to celebrate the centenary of the defeat he inflicted on the English on the Plains of Abraham in 1760.

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Josephte was tried by an English court-martial— condemned her not only to die, but to remain exposed to the public in order to dissuade her fellow citizens from violating human and divine laws.



The iron cage in which Marie-Josephte was imprisoned had a human form. It was curiously constituted, according to the very description of the great Canadian writer Louis Fréchette, also born in Aubigny, "by solid strips of coarse strip and wrought-iron circles [...]. These bands and circles, tightly bound together by powerful rivets, twisted, wound, crisscrossed, and artfully knotted, following, after the manner of the frames of a ship, all the contours of the legs, arms, torso, and head of what must have been a human body. The whole thing was completed by strong rings surrounding the ankles, knees, wrists, elbows, neck and waist. On the top of the head, a large hook with a pivoting base must have been used to suspend this singular coffin<sup>54</sup>. It

is easy to imagine the horror that our ancestors felt at this cage that swayed and creaked under gallows of planks. Everyone could

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<sup>54</sup> •Louis Fréchette published his first text, "The cage of la Corriveau", in the newspaper *La Patrie* on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1885. This text has been rewritten and renamed several times; the best-known version today is the one published in the *People's Almanac* of 1913 under the title "A Relic. La Corriveau", pp. 302-307.

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catch a glimpse, through the bars, of the poor body of the murderer, from whom night and day the crows and other scavengers came to tear off shreds of putrefied flesh. Soon a thousand frightful legends came to swell the reality."

Our ancestors were always ready to believe the most horrible stories of witchcraft. It was no longer *two men* that La Corriveau had murdered, but *eight or ten*. Some nocturnal travelers who had lingered in these rural regions, swore that they had seen, in the dead of night, La Corriveau descending from her gallows and—horror!— She had set off in pursuit.

Marie-Josephte by Alexandre Girard fo "Créatures fantastiques du Québec."



Others claimed that, taking advantage of the darkness, she opened the graves of the local cemetery to feed on the blood and flesh of the newly buried deceased. especially of those who died without receiving the Last Sacraments of religion. Excommunicated parishioners could therefore expect the worst, whether they were those who refused to comply with the directives of the

Clergy or those who, at every opportunity, persisted in rebelling against the King of England, *Defender of the Faith*<sup>55</sup>, with whom the highest Catholic authorities in Canada had signed an agreement to cooperate in the face of the almost always imminent danger of American invasions.

Every corps of deceased, buried outside the sacraments, of a suicide or of a rebel, was attributed to the misdeeds of La Corriveau and used as fodder for her. Every Canadian could imagine with horror the ghost of the witch moving in the darkness and rushing after the poor lost or late traveller. Thus, the doors of all houses were locked and securely barred with crossbars as soon as the sun took some rest behind the horizon. It was believed as a certainty that if the murderer took the whim to stop even for a moment in one place, the ground she touched would become cursed. And on this contaminated ground, accidents of all kinds would multiply, until the curse was definitively neutralized by the blessing of a priest.

Under the gallows, Fréchette continues, "the grass was always burned to the roots. Souls in distress used to meet there, and diabolical dances were sometimes performed in endless sarabands. Several trustworthy persons had seen great black beasts lie down,

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<sup>55</sup> •Henry VIII of England (1491-1547), bore the title of King of France, King of England and King of Ireland. He was related to the French Capetians through his great-grandmother Catherine of France. Pope Leo X awarded him the title of "Defensor Fidei, Defender of the Faith" for harshly reviling Protestants in general and Martin Luther in particular. All the kings of England have borne this title since 1521.

and whisper frightful secrets in the ear of the deceased. They were hideous werewolves, who, it was said, *asked her to marry them*<sup>56</sup>.

At other times, especially on Saturdays, at the stroke of midnight (always according to popular belief), the gallows ceased to creak, and one could see gliding heavily in the dark night some formidable specters advancing slowly towards the shore, making at every step a sinister rattle of chains and scrap metal. Then those who were still awake would sign themselves trembling and knelt down to stammer a *De profundis*. It was La Corriveau who was going to make the Sabbath in the company of the wizards of the Isle d'Orléans. At daybreak she returned to her post, and the gallows began creaking again its mournful. It couldn't last forever.

One morning La Corriveau did not reappear. The people of the region saw this as a wonderful occurrence, as usual. Rumor spread that the horrible machine had been carried off by the devil. There was even a *faint smell of sulphur* in the atmosphere<sup>57</sup>."

This was an indisputable confirmation.

In fact, the reality was quite different. The presence of this sad scarecrow planted at this crossroads so frightened the inhabitants of the villages of Saint-Étienne-de-Beaumont<sup>58</sup> Saint-Gervais, Saint-Thomas<sup>59</sup>, Saint-Michel-de-Bellechasse, and even the peasants of Beauce, who sold fruits and vegetables every week in the

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<sup>56</sup> •To stay within the moral standards of the time. Later on, the expression "going to the Sabbath" has the same meaning.

<sup>57</sup> •Fréchette, 1913.

<sup>58</sup> •Today Beaumont.

<sup>59</sup> •Today Montmagny.

Québec Old Market, just in front of the Jesuit College<sup>60</sup>, that they stopped coming there. The most obstinate went round the frightful crossroads by the river. But it was still true that the shopkeepers and innkeepers suffered unacceptable damage. They absolutely had to do something to restore freedom of movement and peace of mind at the Aubigny crossroads.

Some bold tradesmen, less superstitious than the rest, took advantage of the anonymity of the darkness to secretly go and unhook from its gallows the terrible cage in which the skeleton seemed to occupy less and less space. They buried it in the small nearby cemetery reserved for the tortured and the unidentified drowned; outside the blessed land.

However, in 1830, when the parish church, which had been destroyed by fire, was rebuilt, the cemetery was enlarged on that side. It then absorbed the space of the small cemetery of the outcasts. This explains the presence of the strange relic inside the consecrated enclosure. One fine morning [in 1849], says Fréchette<sup>61</sup>, "two gravediggers —one named Bourassa and one Samson, if I am not mistaken— were busy digging a grave in the eastern part of the cemetery [of Saint-Joseph-de-Lévis], which, as in all Canadian countryside, was then adjacent to the church. Suddenly, one of the picks squeaked on something metallic. What was it? They dug, they smashed, they cleared, and finally they exhumed an iron cage, exactly in the shape of a horrible human

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<sup>60</sup> •The college was demolished in 1895 to make way for Quebec City Hall. The Place du Marché became the Place de l'Hôtel-de-Ville.

<sup>61</sup> •Louis Fréchette, 1913.

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shape.[...] One can imagine the influx of visitors attracted by this curious discovery. This went on for a couple of weeks.

But one morning, it was discovered that the cage of La Corriveau, which had been kept under lock and key in the basement of the sacristy, had again disappeared. The devil had kidnapped it again (the word got around). But the devil this time was P. T. Barnum<sup>62</sup>. Now, those who visit the Boston Museum can see, in a dark corner little frequented by the public, an oblong display case placed horizontally, a mass of old scrap metal, broken, twisted, tangled, eaten away by rust and fire. On the upper part of the frame, a small sign bears this inscription: "*From Quebec.*" This is all that remains of the famous *Cage de la Corriveau*<sup>63</sup>. The person in charge had quietly sold the cage, probably to make some profit from it, but probably also to keep such a gloomy object away. The public display of a criminal's body in an iron cage was no exception.

The upper part of the famous "cage."  
(Priv. Coll.)



<sup>62</sup> •Phineas Barnum (1810-1891) The famous American founder of the circus of this name.

<sup>63</sup> •Louis Fréchette 1913.

Two years before, there had been a man named Paul, an *indentured servant*<sup>64</sup> of the Bélanger family, living in the Saint-Ézéar "rang" of Île Jésus: on the night of March 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>, 1761, he had murdered Charles Bélanger, 39 years old, his wife, Angélique, 34 years old, their son, Charles, 11 years old, and a cousin, Charlotte Bélanger, 11 years old. The carnage was discovered the next morning by neighbors. Charles Bélanger, who was not yet dead, denounced Paul, who was soon found hiding carefully in some wood. He was tried and hanged at Ville-Marie and his corpse "caged" and displayed for a year in front of the house of the crime.

But let's get back to Marie-Josephte Corriveau. She was born in New France on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1733, in the small Appalachian village of Saint-Vallier-de-Bellechasse, nestled in a wonderful site on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. She was the daughter of Joseph Corriveau and Françoise Bolduc, the proud parents of nine children.

With her most advantageous, attractive, and promising figure, she soon aroused feelings of love (or at least desire) in the minds of Saint-Vallier's men, as well as jealousy in the hearts of girls less favored by Mother Nature. As soon as she reached puberty, that is to say, of childbearing age, marriage proposals poured in from candidates for happiness. Or at least, that's what they thought.

The modest daily choices we make, inevitably lead us to the fulfillment of our Destiny. Marie-Josephte was sixteen years old when one of these suitors was accepted by herself and her

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<sup>64</sup> •The so-called "indentured servants" French "*engagés*" immigrants had to work for a Canadian family for several years before receiving a concession. It was truly a form of slavery.

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parents. His name was Charles Bouchard. He was a 23-year-old farmer-owner. He asked for her hand in marriage, obtained it, and married her on a bright spring day in the year 1749.

"The little village of Saint-Vallier, writes Louis Fréchette to give an idea of this happy event, [...] was jubilant. A joyful crowd, in their Sunday fancy best dress crowded around the parish church, laughing, chatting and joking, to the Argentinian sound of a bell recently imported from France. For the first time this bell invited the faithful to a wedding mass. The whole population of the Fort, to use a local expression, seemed disposed to decorate the houses and sow flowers on the steps of the church. The most beautiful of the beauties of ten parishes around was at that moment ascending in the arm of her father. It was the timid and blushing fiancée, Marie-Josephte Corriveau. More than one envious glance greeted the young farmer, with his martial countenance. He too, with his arm resting on his father's, entered the little church at the same time. What a happy victor he was in a contest in which the handsomest and richest young men of the district had disputed the palm with him. But he himself was rich and handsome; and, besides, he accepted his triumph so modestly, so humbly, that everyone forgave him his happiness<sup>65</sup>.

The couple's serenity would no doubt have been absolute if many children had come to crown their union. But happiness is never unmixed; Maybe to save us from getting used to it by becoming jaded. Despite their efforts, which were no doubt meritorious, and the encouragement of the family and the community,

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<sup>65</sup> •Louis Fréchette, 1913.

as well as the frowns of the parish priest during the annual parish visit, the beautiful Marie-Josephte's belly was only rounded three times during the twelve years that their union lasted: they welcomed Françoise, Angélique and Charles. What may appear to be a large family by the standards of the twenty-first century was at that time considered an infertile and selfish couple. Canadian households were among the most prolific in the world in those days.

Then a fatal morning, as our national writer so brilliantly relates, the neighbors, surprised, "saw the young woman arrive, disheveled, beside herself, and seeming struck with terror. She said, sobbing, that she had just found her husband dead in his bed. The deceased was very popular. He was sincerely regretted, and everyone expressed the warmest sympathy to the young widow. Her grief seemed so natural that no suspicion arose in anyone's mind.

The warmest sympathies, certainly, at any rate, until the young and beautiful widow, who was not yet thirty years old, neglecting to give sufficient time to the sacrosanct period of mourning, began to flirt with another farmer in the village. Then the rumors began to run wild. Bouchard's death suddenly appeared as a very strange event. How could a man in the prime of life, 33 years old, die for no apparent reason? The most daring in backbiting quickly came to suggest that he had probably been murdered by his jealous wife. But why is that? Because the brave Charles showed a marked taste for licentiousness, it was claimed. Perhaps this was the explanation for the lack of fertility in their marriage. He was scattering his fruitful seed in the barren ground of debauchery. It was becoming quite evident that it was not the way to enrich his

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household with childish laughter and future Heavenly Elect. But as no one could prove anything, the gossip ran out of steam like racing greyhounds.

After fifteen short months of widowhood, the beautiful Marie-Josephte Bouchard-Corriveau was again married to the man whom she had endeavoured to associate with, as discreetly as possible. Louis Dodier, the newly chosen husband, took on the role of the future victim with delight and recklessness.

After a few months of apparent harmony, a new twist came to throw into disarray the small village, which was just beginning to forget the tragic and suspicious death of her first husband. One morning Louis Dodier was found in the stable, almost under the hoofs of his horse, his skull smashed by what appeared to be the horseshoe. Which tends to prove that horseshoes don't always bring good luck!

This fateful day was January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1763. At that time, so sad for French-speaking Canadians, New France, insufficiently supported by his King Louis XV, who was far too busy enjoying all the pleasures of life rather than taking care of public affairs, had just succumbed to the blows of the English. In continental Europe, cunning England had allied itself with powerful Prussia so that the latter would make war on France, leaving carte blanche to England which could thus seize French overseas colonies. Less than a fortnight after the death of Louis Dodier, New France was ceded to England by the Treaty of Paris on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1763.

The investigation into the crimes of Marie-Josephte Corriveau was thus to be conducted smoothly by an English Court-Martial,

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which was much more expeditious than the one that had tried Marie-Joseph Angélique.

The trial took place in the great hall of the Ursuline convent at Quebec. The Court-Martial was made up of twelve bilingual English officers, no doubt more accustomed to giving short, curt orders to their Scottish Highlanders than well versed in the subtleties of criminal law. The twelve judges, presided over by Lieutenant-General Roger Morris, listened at length to the witnesses, who spoke only French.

The investigation at the crime scene revealed that, contrary to the wife's allegations, the victim Louis Dodier had not been struck by his horse's hooves, but by an iron pitchfork, which was found nearby still stained with blood. The murderer had simply neglected to clean the murder weapon after use.

Altercations, declamations, and oratorical scuffles between the Crown prosecutor, Hector Théophilus Cramahé, and the defense lawyer, Jean-Antoine Saillant, followed one another tirelessly over the course of the days, between March 29<sup>th</sup> and April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1763. Each one surreptitiously pulled out of his hat some witnesses for the prosecution or for the defense, whom the adversary meticulously cross-examined in order to set traps for them.

Thus, appeared on the witness stand a young girl named Élisabeth Marguerite Viau, commonly called Isabelle Sylvain, niece and confidante of the accused. Her testimony was damning. This was followed by the questioning of Joseph Corriveau, the namesake and neighbor of the accused's elderly father, and finally that of Claude Dion, another neighbor.

The best lawyers are those who have mastered the art of distorting the truth without seeming to do so. As a result, it is conceivable that the proceedings were very animated under the gloomy eye of the English officers, who did not necessarily grasp all the French expressions of the soil, and under the even more gloomy eye of the accused. All these contingencies insinuated in the minds of the judges the conviction of Marie-Josephte Corriveau's guilt.

The suspicious circumstances of the crime were intertwined and juxtaposed with each other like pieces of a puzzle, and soon the circumstantial evidence appeared as conclusive evidence. No one had the shadow of a doubt as to Marie-Josephte Corriveau's guilt.

It was suggested that the death of Charles Bouchard, the accused's first husband, seemed no less strange than the second death. It is often the second crime that arouses suspicion about the first. How could a young, vigorous, healthy man die like this in his bed, for no apparent reason? The riddle deserved at least some consideration. Bouchard's corpse was therefore exhumed with great care, and in the skull, now empty after three years of corruption, a heavy and black object was found: lead casting. Molten lead had been poured into his ear during the night... hence, no doubt, the leaden sleep which had carried him away. Let the reader be indulgent of this exasperating banter under such horrible circumstances.

The so-called circumstantial evidence appeared very conclusive in the minds of the soldiers. The most senior in the highest rank prepared to announce the sentence that condemned Mary

Josephte to die. They also decided that she should receive, before dying, sixty lashes of the whip with nine straps, on her bare back, in three different places, in order to demonstrate to the greatest number of people the very persuasive cruelty of this exemplary punishment: twenty lashes would be administered under the scaffold, twenty in the market place of Quebec<sup>66</sup>.and the last twenty in the parish of Saint-Vallier. The left hand would be branded with the infamous letter **M**<sup>67</sup>. Criminel, watch out!

Suddenly, in the excitement of the verdict, a hunched old man with white hair got up and limped up to the Court of Justice, shouting in a voice broken with emotion:

*—Stop, gentlemen! Stop it! You're going to convict an innocent woman... It was I who killed Louis Dodier.*

The Chief Justice then suspended his sentence, and the old man, his shrill voice shaken by deep sobs, knelt down on the stone floor and announced, looking straight into the eyes of the president of the Court of Justice:

*—I am the only one to blame. Do with me what you will !*

It was Joseph Corriveau, the Defendant's father. Mad with grief at seeing no other way to save the life of his dear daughter whom he adored, he came to offer his freedom and his life as a sacrifice, in exchange for his own.

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<sup>66</sup> •That is to say, at the top of the current Côte de la Fabrique.

<sup>67</sup> •For Malefactor or Murderer. The branding of recidivist criminals with red-hot iron continued until 1 832 in France.

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It is easy to imagine the effect of this astonishing statement on the judges of the Court Martial and on the public. In the dock, Marie-Josephte did not seem overly surprised. Some thought she was expecting it. According to witnesses, she greeted her father's sacrifice —for he was not guilty and she knew that more than anyone else, of course— with relief and even coldness. Immediately afterwards she let the supreme sentence fall upon the poor man's head without protest, for the judges, who were not magistrates, took the old man's pseudo-confession for absolute certainty.

The father's fallacious confession —though generous— not only immediately convinced the English officers, who were not very clear-sighted in the testimonial complications of the criminal law, but it destroyed at the same time the generous testimony of Isabelle Sylvain, a witness for the prosecution, whose statements were henceforth attributed to sordid motives of jealousy against the accused. For, as we have said to caricature the situation, if Marie-Josephte's beauty aroused admiration and various fantasies in men, some women felt nothing but spite and jealousy. Isabella was therefore found guilty of perjury and, consequently, sentenced to whipping and blogging for her *crime of perjury resulting in death*. Marie-Josephte herself escaped death, but not whipping for complicity.

Louis Fréchette attributes to the Lower-Estuary writer, Philippe Aubert de Gaspé, the discovery of the authentic statement of the sentence after it had been modified to encompass all the culprits:

"Québec, 10 April 1763.

*The Court Martial, presided over by Lieutenant-Colonel Morris, having heard the trial of Mr. Joseph Corriveau and Marie-Josephte Corriveau, Canadians, charged with the murder of Louis Dodier, and the trial of Isabelle Sylvain, a Canadian accused of perjury in the same cause, the Governor ratifies and confirms the following sentences: Joseph Corriveau, having been found guilty of the crime charged against him, is accordingly sentenced to be hanged.*

*The Court is also of opinion that Marie-Josephte Corriveau, his daughter, widow of the late Dodier, is guilty of complicity in the said murder before the fact, and consequently condemns her to receive sixty lashes with nine straps, on her bare back, at three different places, namely: under the scaffold, in the market place of Quebec, and in the parish of Saint-Vallier, twenty strokes in each place, and to be marked on the left hand with the letter M, with a red-hot iron."*

The Court also ordered Isabelle Sylvain to receive sixty lashes of a nine-strap whip on her bare back, in the same manner, in the same places and at the same time as the said Josephte Corriveau, and to be marked in the same way with the letter P, on the left hand<sup>68</sup>.

The old man, thus condemned to death, had to prepare to die. He bravely took the road to prison, while his daughter, transported with enthusiasm at the idea of having escaped from the rope, did not even deign, according to the testimony, to cast a

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<sup>68</sup> •Louis Fréchette, 1913, using a free translation of Philippe Aubert de Gaspé (1863). *Les Anciens Canadiens*, Québec, Desbarats et Derbshire, imprimeurs-éditeurs, 1863, p. 368. The P is for Perjury.

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glance of pity or gratitude at him. Perhaps she was afraid to look at her father as we hesitate to face the baseness of our life.

As for Isabelle Sylvain, the main witness for the prosecution, she was, as might be expected, totally upset by the sentence which made her a vile and treacherous being. The P stigmatized the crime of perjury of which the young woman was unjustly accused. She doubtless thought that *Justice was blind*, as the wise saying goes, and that she would have done better to deal with it from far, far away.

The superior of the Jesuits, the Reverend Father Augustin Louis de Clapion, an intelligent and thoughtful man, does not seem to have been convinced of the old man's guilt. He arranged to be the confessor of the condemned man and made him understand that his execution would damn him for eternity, if he lied in confession. By brandishing, like a pommel pistol, that formidable and unremedied weapon, the menace of *eternal hell*, he easily induced him to confess his lie.

The heroic father, who would gladly have walked to the gallows and sacrificed *his body* to save his daughter, did not resign himself to offering *his soul*. The truth was revealed to the judges. A new court-martial was set up under the orders of General Thomas Mills, who was all the more implacable to Marie-Josephte because she had cowardly consented to see her aged father suffer the last torture for a crime she herself had perpetrated. Some rumors even accused her of having pressed her father to accuse himself in order to save her. But nothing is less certain. It is to be hoped that the latter accusation was unfounded.

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A new trial was held, and the Court heard the confession of Marie-Josephte, who confessed to having killed her husband with two blows to the head with an axe, while he was sleeping, and then of dragging him to the stable in an attempt to make it appear that a horse had smashed his skull with a blow from its hoof.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, 1763, the Chief Justice, General Thomas Mills, read the following new sentence:

*"Quebec, April 15, 1763.*

*The Court Martial, presided over by Lieutenant-Colonel Morris, is dissolved.*

The General Court Martial, having tried Marie-Josephte Corriveau, accused of the murder of her husband Dodier, found her guilty. The Governor (Murray<sup>69</sup>) ratifies and confirm the following death sentence: *Marie Josephte Corriveau will be put to death for this crime, and her body will be chained and hung in such place as the Governor may think it necessary to designate<sup>70</sup>.*

*Signed, Thomas Mills<sup>71</sup>*

The gallows thus stood menacingly on the summit of the highest part of the Buttes-à-Nepveu<sup>72</sup>, which we now call Parliament Hill since the Government Palace was erected there on the north-eastern fringes of the plains of Abraham Martin. These mounds

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<sup>69</sup> •James Murray, military governor, and later governor general of Canada.

<sup>70</sup> •Exhibited to the public in accordance with English law (Statutes of the United Kingdom, 25, George II, 1 752).

<sup>71</sup> •Louis Fréchette, 1913, reprinted in a free translation Aubert de Gaspé (1863), p. 369.

<sup>72</sup> •Jean Nepveu, father of Barbe Nepveu, owned part of the Plains of Abraham.

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slope further to the southwest, well inside the Plains of Abraham, the edges of which have been largely buried under urban constructions. It was this part of the Plains that had seen the English regiments run in the midst of a panic on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1760, pursued by the Canadian bayonets of General Lévis' soldiers.

On April 18<sup>th</sup>, a dense crowd gathered around the place of execution. Some spectators perched on the fortifications of Quebec City and then, after noticing that the distance did not allow them to see the most horrific details adequately, they climbed the slope between present-day Rue Saint-Louis and Rue Dauphine.

Marie-Josephte Corriveau bravely went to her death under the hateful vociferations of the populace. Perhaps this is what caused the young woman to die resolutely. A way of expressing her contempt for all those *voyeurs* who would have been too happy to see her weak, watery, and pitiful. The execution was therefore carried out without a hitch.

The condemned woman died with the same composure that had enabled her to kill her two husbands by violence, with the same phlegm that would have given her the energy to let her own father die in her place without batting an eyelid. She flew to the clouds of Eternity with the same bite, the same mask of apparent courage as those who die for a noble cause.

As soon as the doctor in charge and the executioner had ascertained that death had done its work as a result of the efforts of

the *boot-puller* or the *down-pusher*,<sup>73</sup> and that the young woman had paid for her crimes according to Canadian law, her corpse was loaded onto a boat which crossed the St. Lawrence to reach the crossroads of Aubigny not far from her village of origin. There, another sinister gallows had been erected. At this place, the Governor James Murray had decided to display the body of the dead woman, in an iron cage specially woven and forged to the shape of Marie-Josephe's body.

It was there that La Corriveau began her second legendary career, that of a ghost. Until May, when she was secretly detached and buried in the nearby cemetery by shopkeepers furious that their customers were deserting the area and their profits were doing the same, the inhabitants heard nightly screams, groans, and the creaking of iron hooks. It was wrongly claimed that she had been locked alive in her cage. And the people believed it, because otherwise, what was the point of putting her in a cage? It was said that she died there of starvation and misery. Some passers-by had seen, under cover of night, ugly werewolves who came happily to fornicate with her at the very foot of the cage that she could leave at her leisure. A ghost can pass through walls at will, can't it? All the more so between the bars of a cage!

Everyone had their own creative story, fueled by imagination, fear, and repressed sex-fantasies. Each one added a few details to the rumor, to the juicy story they were hearing, to make it still

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<sup>73</sup> •As we said earlier, before the invention of the trapdoor, the executioners tried to hasten the death of the condemned man by strangling him, either by pulling him by the feet (boot-pulling) or by tying his hands behind his back and putting all his weight (as on a stirrup) on the body of the victim (pushing down). This hastened her death and shortened her horrible agony.

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more vivid, more frightening. On Saturdays, at midnight precisely, the gallows ceased to creak, and it was then a whole sabbath of sorcerers and witches who filled the night with sinister rattling of chains. They reached the Île d'Orléans and the Archipelago of Witches<sup>74</sup> to find a little privacy in order to practice their problematic carnal activities. In the rigid society of this Victorian era, sexuality could only be titillated, and fantasies could only roam in such a ghostly and infernal setting.

Then, those who were not yet asleep signed themselves<sup>75</sup> trembling and fell on their knees to stammer out an imploring *De profundis*:

*From the depths of my misfortunes,  
I cry out to you, Lord,  
Lord, hear my call...*

Week after week, it was not two, but seven men she had killed. The first was suffocated under a pillow for no apparent reason. The second, a drunkard who had the bad idea of beating her, the energetic female hanged him like a simple thug. To the third (a spoon-melter), she simply melted a spoon in his ear. To the fourth, a doctor, she administered an unfortunate apothecary's recipe of her own potions. The fifth fell into a final sleep with a single blow of the flat of an axe. As for the sixth, a shoemaker, she thrust her awl, her long curved needle, through his navel. As for the seventh

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<sup>74</sup> •Today, the Archipelago of L'île-aux-Grues, off the coast of Montmagny.

<sup>75</sup> •To sign oneself = to make the sign of the cross to ward off the devil.

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and last companion of this man-eater, no doubt at the end of her imagination, she simply impaled him on a pitchfork.

Thus was the famous legend of La Corriveau *flowered by inhabitants full of fertile imagination.*



The cage of the Corriveau, as imagined by a person  
who hadn't read the story well.

## Crime and hanging of Marie-Anne Crispin

"The most beautiful garment that can dress a woman, the great couturier Yves Saint-Laurent once said, *is the arms of the man she loves. For the others, I'm there.*" In the 1850s, most of the men of Saint-Jérôme would have liked to dress the beautiful Marie-Anne Crispin's body with their arms.

At a time when women were considered *the weaker sex* — which certainly gave them inconveniences, but also real advantages, such as the habitual escape from the gallows or War Conscription— Marie-Anne was undoubtedly an exception to the rule. With her lumberjack stature and mover's build, she would have been intimidating to most men if her charms had not been genuinely feminine. Furthermore, her reputation in the city of Saint-Jérôme suggested that she possessed a most ardent, even volcanic, nature, especially at a time when frigidity was elevated to the status of a virtue by the Victorian conceptions in which the western world was marinating. All these rumours were circulating and did not fail to make the men of the region fantasize, and the women enrage with jealousy.

Marie-Anne Crispin was tall at 1.80 m<sup>76</sup>, very attractive, and men had watched her grow with an interested eye throughout her brief life. However, her character, tempered as the steel of a Toledo sword, her tongue as sharp as it was acerbic, and her ever-

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<sup>76</sup> •1.8m = 6'0".

awakening fighting spirit (like Joan of Arc), had made her famous throughout the Laurentides. Most of the men did not dare to pay court to her, for to do so they must not be inhibited by the slightest shyness. They might have had the impression, with some reason, that they were courting a *praying mantis*<sup>77</sup>, vaguely inhabited by the premonition of risking their lives for a few moments of copulatory voluptuousness.

In the end, the most ambitious —the most oblivious, some villagers thought— hit the jackpot and married the beautiful young woman. His name was Jean-Baptiste Gobier, known as Bélisle<sup>78</sup>. He was an old man, a rich farmer from the vicinity of Saint-Jérôme; *rich* but *old*, the former excusing the latter. If he had made his brain work instead of letting himself be guided by his impulses (we would say today by his hormones) he might have suspected that he had opted for trouble and unhappiness. But the vanity of males, too bewitched by the same obsession, remains immeasurable. Despite popular opinion, the bride and groom escaped the traditional "charivari" that stigmatized unsuitable or unreasonable marriages.

The surprise of some was equalled only by the amusement of those who knew that, even before her wedding, the beautiful Marie-Anne Crispin had been having a *secret affair* with a married man, a certain Antoine Desforges, who lived with his wife

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<sup>77</sup> •The praying mantis (*Mantis religiosa*) or *devil's horse* belongs to the order Mantoptera (Mantodea). It devours its male after mating.

<sup>78</sup> •In early Canada, only ten thousand French people emigrated to New France, which was as large as Europe. France was the most populous country in the world, but the Lords didn't want to lose their serfs (free labor like slaves). Today these ten thousand have generated ten million of them. So, nicknames help to diversify people.

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Catherine in the same town. Nowadays, such behavior has been largely trivialized by the marital extravagances of Prince Charles of England, but in the Victorian era of MarieAnne Crispin, newspapers were less mocking; they refrained from peddling these libertine blunders to the wind.



Antoine Desforges' wife, Catherine Prévost, was in poor health condition. She was unable to meet her husband's insatiable conjugal needs. It was the same insoluble problem that afflicted old Jean-Baptiste Gobier with his volcanic young wife, but in his case, age was the cause. In order to ease this problem of chronic dissatisfaction which, generally, overwhelms most couples worn out by the glitches of existence, the two lovers spent most of their free time together, consoling each other through thousands of compensations that their respective spouses were unable to provide. So much so, in fact, that Marie-Anne Crispin became pregnant as a result of their frequent recreational activities. She gave birth to a son who, to avoid scandal, was immediately abandoned as a "*hidden child*" at the home of a relative in Montreal, many kilometers away. In those days, gossip about a woman's reputation was more important than the happiness of a "*hidden child*". *Honour* consisted in keeping up the appearance of a reputation, not in insuring the well-being of a child who had been called to life. Such was the moral sense of that bygone era.

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After Marie-Anne Crispin's marriage, the love affair continued without the slightest reservation, of course. Old Jean-Baptiste Gobier, known as Bélisle, was very proud of having been the glorious chosen husband of the most beautiful girl in the village. He never failed to parade around with Marie-Anne as soon as there was a sufficient number of admirers. or so-called admirers: family reunions, fairs, markets,... Had he known what his fellow countrymen thought of him, he certainly wouldn't have done it so. But isn't it better to ignore what the jealous neighbors think of us? It is usually said that *what is ignored does no harm*, but it must be admitted that in this particular case (as in several others in this research), Jean-Baptiste would have been able to enjoy life longer if he had been made aware of these indelicacies.

In fact, everyone in St. Jérôme knew the secret of this romance story between the two lovers, except the husband himself. Marie-Anne often met her lover Antoine at the home of his brother, Jean-Baptiste Desforges, whose house had become the love nest of the two infidels.

The situation persisted for several months, in fact up to the spring of 1856, until the sudden death of the old husband Gobier. The sniggers then turned to malicious persiflage, according to which this death was undoubtedly a sinister assassination. But an autopsy, ordered by the Courts, revealed no particular clue to the inexperienced forensic pathologist who carried it out. Death seemed natural, and as a result Marie-Anne Crispin inherited a considerable fortune for the time: two complete farms and numerous plots of land.

The young widow was not yet thirty years old, and the suitors, doubly in love, began to parade at her home throughout the end of 1856 and the first half of 1857. After her first marital failure, the young woman seemed to take special care in choosing her next husband. She subjected most of the contenders to a kind of competency test to gauge the candidate's qualities of resilience. Some suitors, assured that they had attained a high level of performance, boasted of their good fortune and exploits with the young widow at the end of the interview. But nothing in this area is completely certain. Such was the vital energy of the merry widow that it did not in the least prevent her from seeking some additional affection from Antoine Desforges, who retained all his privileges as sweetheart-in-chief.

It was easy to imagine that Catherine Prévost-Desforges, the latter's wife, was well aware of her fickle husband's exploits, for she did little to conceal her implacable hatred of her rival Marie-Anne Crispin. But when we don't feel strong enough to fight back effectively, we tend to pretend to tolerate an unacceptable situation out of grandeur. Yet this silence seemed to absolve her husband's failings.

The rest of our story proves that Catherine was wrong to bow to her man's extravagance, for according to the police's suspicions that were revealed during the trial, she was second on the list of people to be murdered. The two lovers planned to marry in due form, as they say, *before God and men*, as soon as the "obstacles" were removed. The first of these *impediments* had been Old Go-bier, and the second was to be the sickly Catherine Prévost-Desforges.

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Despite the unsuccessful autopsy performed on Gobier's old body, the police kept a vigilant and circumspect eye on Marie-Anne Crispin's actions. According to the investigators, the two lovers held a meeting of a *capital* importance —in fact as *capital* as the sentence that was to befall them as a result of the decisions they made during this three-way meeting, towards the end of December 1 1857 at the home of Jean-Baptiste Desforges in Saint-Jérôme.

The three scoundrels put the finishing touches to the conspiracy to plan Catherine's death and thus send her to a world that is believed to be better, although no one, even among the most devout, is eager to go and verify the accuracy of this opinion and this beliefs.



On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1858, as he left his brother's house, Antoine confided to several of his neighbors that he was leaving immediately (that same evening) to visit his dear son in a village 45 kilometers away. It was a horseback round trip that normally took three days. For if everyone had a role to play in the perpetration of the crime, Antoine, for his part, simply had to walk away. Thus, in the unlikely occurrence that events took an unexpected and negative turn, Marie-Anne would avoid being deprived of her sweetheart by a stay in prison, or, in the worst case, by a death sentence. Antoine may not have had the nerve to murder his wife.

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Which is to his credit. Moreover, the rest of this tragic story will show the reader that the essential value of this man did not lie in his brain, but elsewhere, on a less intellectual level. So, it was better for the brother-in-law to take all the risks.

Marie-Anne, for her part, was unlikely to suffer any criminal consequences as a result of a crime. In the unthinkable occurrence that she was caught, she knew that women were not executed... or so rarely.

After the departure of her dear and beloved Antoine to a distant region that would provide him with the strongest alibi in case of need, Marie-Anne Crispin went directly to the latter's home, *ostensibly to take care of the poor and fragile Catherine* during her husband's absence.

When night fell, Jean-Baptiste Desforges, the third conspirator, secretly went to the home of his brother Antoine to lend a helping hand to Marie-Anne. We can easily imagine the state of mind of the unfortunate Catherine, delivered into the evil hands of her rival. Even if she could not possibly have imagined that her husband's mistress would have the heart to murder her, she must have appreciated the arrival of Jean-Baptiste, for she was doubtless deluding herself with the illusion that Marie-Anne could not do her the slightest harm in the presence of a witness. The idea of a conspiracy probably never crossed her mind.

At a predetermined time of the night, the two assassins approached the bed on some pretext. By the flickering light of a candle, they suddenly jumped upon the sick woman and seized her to immobilize her and put her to death. While Marie-Anne Crispin

held the legs of poor Catherine Prévost-Desforges, paralyzed by terror and in any case too weak to defend herself, Jean-Baptiste placed a pillow over her face and held it tightly in place, in order to suffocate his sister-in-law. Then, after a satisfactory period of time, the two executioners sat down together on Catherine's body, one on the pillow still in place against her face, and the other on her stomach and chest in order to make sure that she could no longer breathe and that the last breath of life would be expired.

While the two murderers were carrying out their infamous murder, Antoine Desforges, the cowardly husband of the poor victim, galloped breathlessly along the country roads away from the scene of the crime. He had taken off, in order —as we have said—to present an indestructible alibi to the investigators in case the outcome of the crime was not as favorable as they had all hoped. At night, Antoine Desforges stopped his horse-drawn carriage in front of a rural inn situated at least ten kilometers from Saint-Jérôme. There he took a room for the night.

Very anxious to make his presence noticed, so that the inn-keeper might eventually testify in his favor by assuring the police<sup>79</sup> that the "St-Jérômian" was far from the crime scene at the time of the killing, Antoine made a noise in his room, a great din, even too much uproar, until late in the night. Somewhat simplistic, he did

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<sup>79</sup> •The word *Police* is used here by default because the Canadian Federal Police was not created until 1873 to monitor the Indians in the West. The Police of the Province of Quebec was created in Quebec City in 1838 to monitor and repress the French Canadians after the Patriote uprising in 1837, who were fighting for fair democracy and against the nepotism of the English colonial authorities. Here, the police officers were municipal investigators hired by the city of Montreal.

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not think for a moment that his inexplicable behavior would indirectly incriminate him in everyone's mind.

The next morning, during breakfast with the hotelier and his wife, he went so far as to apologize for the disconcerting uproar he had caused, saying that he had spent the night wide awake, sleepless, thinking of his poor wife, who was so ill that *she didn't have long to live*. Curiously, he added later in the conversation, that when his wife IS DEAD, he had planned to marry a much younger and healthier woman.

The confusion in *the concordance of the verbs-tenses* was by no means forgotten by the innkeeper and his wife. They did not fail to report this revealing "error" to the police in the course of the criminal investigation that followed. There is no shadow of a doubt that Marie-Anne Crispin did not like this man for the power of his mind.

Finally, in the middle of the morning the next day, Antoine judged that his pseudo trip to his family was no longer necessary since his wife had probably ceased to live for hours. So, he turned back to go home to Saint-Jérôme. As expected, he found his wife's corpse lying on the marital bed. His mistress Marie-Anne, who was circling like a hunted beast in the little house, must have felt a little nervous in spite of her well-known impassivity. They decided that Antoine would fetch the neighbor, named Madame Urbaine, to help him prepare his wife's body for burial.

When Madame Urbaine, totally devoid of the slightest suspicion, arrived at Antoine's house, she was received by none other than... Marie-Anne Crispin herself, and the neighbor wondered

why Marie-Anne had not come herself to ask for help in the morning, before Antoine arrived.

In order to answer this unformulated but implicit and logical question, Marie-Anne explained to her that, not feeling well, Catherine Prévost-Desforges had asked her to spend the night with her. So, she had devoted herself to staying with her and had slept *in the same bed*. Now, when she awoke that very morning, rather late, she had realized that poor Catherine Desforges had died in her sleep.

The scenario of service rendered out of friendship would have been likely if the two women had been sincere friends. But it was common knowledge —and Madame Urbaine was not unaware of it either— that Catherine Desforges passionately hated Marie-Anne Crispin. This nocturnal devotion of the brutal and impetuous mistress to the rival wife (a reputation that was well established) seemed to Madame Urbaine particularly contradictory.

When this lady, the neighbor, entered the room where the body of the dead woman lay, her suspicions grew still greater. It was evident that only one person had slept in that bed. The sheets made this clear. But Marie-Anne Crispin persisted in asserting that she had slept beside the dead woman. Catherine's body lay peacefully on her back, one arm resting limply across her chest and the second at her side. Everything seemed too artificial, too clean, too tidy. But fortunately for the sake of her own life, Mrs. Urbaine had the good intuition to keep her doubts well hidden in the depths of her being, instead of pointing out that the couple's statements did not fit with reality.

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In the company of the woman whom she already considered to be a murderer, the neighbour prepared the body for burial by putting it in its most beautiful dress, in accordance with the funeral rites of the past. Then she left with relief the place of suspicion, indignity and tragedy.

Scarcely had she left the house of the crime, when Madame Urbaine went straight to the presbytery, in order to confide her doubts to the priest of the parish, who was practically the only authority in the village. The latter was of course aware of all the rumours and allegations that were circulating in the village about the double or triple life of each of the actors in this drama. He knew this by the normal channels of public rumour and gossip, of course, but also by that of the confessionals, which made it possible to monitor consciences and thus behavior. Without wasting another minute more, the clergyman had his beadle harness his cabriolet and set off for Montreal to notify the police, who had kept open the dusty old file concerning the mysterious death of Jean-Baptiste Gobier, dit Bélisle. Police authorities had kept this gruesome dossier activated since 1856.

At the news of this second suspicious death, investigators descended on the small town of Saint-Jérôme like a flock of vultures. A doctor was commissioned. He immediately diagnosed that Catherine Prévost had not died naturally. Emboldened by the utter success of their first assassination, the murderers had literally botched the second killing. The embarrassing questions of the police began to dangerously crack the candid innocence of Marie-Anne and Jean-Baptiste, and, in spite of resistance, to blow the

tightness of the omerta which the conspirators had sworn to respect at all costs.

Admittedly, at this stage of the investigation, many questions remained unanswered. Antoine Desforges was thus asked to explain why he had left Saint-Jérôme the night before the crime to supposedly go and visit his son, and why he had turned back the next morning without having seen the latter. And what was the meaning of all his curious comments to the innkeeper, and his singular slips of the tongue ?

Under this avalanche of questions, the feeble Antoine, whom Marie-Anne had kept away because she feared his frailty and irresoluteness, the feeble Antoine, therefore, began to hesitate in his answers, which he had evidently neglected to anticipate.

As soon as the autopsy revealed that the cause of death was asphyxiation and not a hypothetical heart attack, the police proceeded to arrest Marie-Anne Crispin who, according to her own admission, had remained continuously in the house of the crime, and therefore must have necessarily been there at the time of the murder.

Besieged at length with embarrassing questions, Antoine stubbornly denied his own involvement in his poor wife's death. He explained that he had not continued on his way to visit his son for the simple reason that *his horse was very tired*. Whatever, it was clear that death itself had not been inflicted by his own hands, so he was not too troubled by Justice. Antoine was nevertheless arrested and imprisoned, but only for complicity in the murder of Jean-Baptiste Gobier, dit Bélisle, the unfortunate husband of

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Marie-Anne Crispin. The two accused were transferred and detained in Montreal.

Marie-Anne, on the other hand, began to crack under the investigators' pressing questions. Yes, she had, with the help of her brother-in-law Jean-Baptiste, murdered Catherine Prévost. But she swore to all her gods that her dear Antoine had not in the least taken part in the crime. Dragged into the avalanche of confessions like a mountaineer by the fall of his lead climber, Jean-Baptiste Desforges himself ended up confessing his active role in the perpetration of the assassination, but also refused to implicate his brother; perhaps under the influence of his sister-in-law, who seemed determined until the very end to spare her lover's freedom and life.



The trial of Marie-Anne and Jean-Baptiste began on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1858. Neither of the two defendants was called to testify, their initial confessions being simply admitted into evidence. They were eventually found guilty by the jury and sentenced to death by hanging *with execution within a week*. Why in such a short space of time, probably to prevent opposition to the execution of a woman from getting organised.

Until the last moment, it was hoped that Marie-Anne would collapse and involve her lover. As a result, Antoine was kept

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behind bars. But, either out of love or because Antoine had really not participated in the murder itself, no one, neither his mistress nor his brother, agreed to admit any complicity, even indirect. Perhaps he had even tried to oppose the killing of his wife? We'll never know. The culprits carried this heavy secret in their respective graves. Like Marie-Joseph Angélique, who had sacrificed herself to spare her beloved Claude Thibault, Marie-Anne refused to incriminate her lover. This shows the spirit of sacrifice of women.

Several delays were granted by the Canadian authorities, who were reluctant to execute a woman, fearing the reaction of the populace. But the crime had been so horrific —and another woman was the victim— that it had to be resolved. Clemency as well as pardon were systematically refused, and the date of execution had to be fixed. The authorities chose June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1858. The partners in crime would only see the first days of summer.

A scaffold was immediately set up, and *the Woods of Justice* erected on their platform. The erection had been planned in the middle of the street, just across from the old Montreal jail. In order to emphasize its exemplarity, the execution was announced everywhere, both in the pulpit and in the public markets.

This was not the first time a woman had been sentenced to death in Montreal since the British occupation of Canada. Thirty-two years earlier, Marie Bélanger had been sentenced to death, but instead of being executed, she had finally been deported to Bermuda. Judith Couture had also been convicted in 1829 for the murder of her five children. But she, too, had gotten away with a

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short prison sentence. Two other women<sup>80</sup> were convicted of theft in 1830, and served only a few brief years in prison. Another was to be executed on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1840, for murder. She, too, had escaped death with a period of incarceration. Marie-Anne had been able to believe, with some reason, that at the last moment her grace would arrive from Ottawa or London, that Jean-Baptiste would fly alone toward the Great Prairies of Manitou, and that she would remain on this earth to spend serene days with her beloved Antoine.

Unfortunately, this was not the case, and she soon realized that she would go down in History as the first woman to be executed in Montreal under British colonial rule. She had to follow her beautiful lover's brother.



The dreaded day came in spite of her prayers and her nightly and daytime terrors. On the morning of the execution, a large crowd of 15,000 Montrealers gathered in front of the *Wood of Justice*. The scaffold stood menacingly to the west of the palisade. It was five meters higher than the wall, so it was visible as far as the St. Lawrence River. Peasant families (the *colonists*, as they are still scornfully called today with contempt<sup>81</sup>) had come in horse-drawn

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<sup>80</sup> •Mary Manning and Mary McNaughton.

<sup>81</sup> •In Canada, migrants from the lower peoples became colonists, i.e. sharecroppers belonging to seigneuries granted to aristocrats. The Seigneurial System in Canada was intended to control the

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carriages with the picnic basket. The bravest (or the most curious) had risen at dawn to reserve the first seats for themselves.

As for the two convicts, they had spent their last night in the company of the prison chaplain, for one, and some of the Sisters of Mercy for the other. These psychological supports remained with the condemned until the very end, in the hope of exhorting them to repentance by inspiring them with the terror of the After-life, as was done at the time.

The executioner having erected only one gallows for the sake of economy, it was necessary for the two condemned persons to succeed each other at the end of the rope. I almost said at the end of the same rope, but we know that ropes were immediately cut into fragments by cunning executioners and sold at a high price to all the superstitious who thought in exchange to obtain happiness or good fortune. Some less scrupulous executioners did not hesitate to stock up on ropes at the general store around the corner in order to increase their income.

The executioner Guire, who held the official position of *Executor of the High Works of the Dominion of Canada* at that relatively early period, decided that Jean-Baptiste should go first, probably out of fear that the execution of a woman would provoke a riot that might disrupt the second hanging. As a result, Marie-Anne Crispin had to give way to Jean-Baptiste. She did so, no doubt, with a cheerful heart; It's easy to understand.

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population and recreate the social classes of France. In Acadia and Louisiana, the peasants were free.

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The executioner had concealed his cadaverous thinness, his bloodless face with ghostly pallor, and his inordinately long hair, which made him look like a specter, under a long black robe and a balaclava. This outfit gave him the appearance of a Halloween ghost roaming the good land of Quebec. He brought Jean-Baptiste from the cell after carefully tying his hands. Full of contrition, the condemned young man had spent the evening in the company of the chaplain of the prison, Father Villeneuve, who also gave him comfort on the scaffold. The brother-in-law went to his death courageously. He climbed the stairs of the gallows with a steady foot, and without any hesitation. He let his legs be tied without reluctance, and plunged into death as if he had performed a habitual gesture of his daily life, with the same appearance of nervousness as a newlywed who by a simple and banal "YES I DO!" will alienate his freedom for the greater part of his existence.

If the spectators didn't have enough for their trip with Jean-Baptiste, the execution of Marie-Anne Crispin —who remained for everyone the main attraction, the highlight of the day— would give them the cold sweat and the adrenaline rush they had come to seek (even if this expression did not yet exist).

Jean-Baptiste hung on the fatal rope until he died, as the judge's sentence required. In his case, for a good twenty minutes, good for the onlookers of course. After that, the executioner cut the rope and the corpse was removed, put in a coffin and evacuated to make way for Marie-Anne.



So, it was the young woman's turn. She had been watched all night by two Sisters of Mercy who had been given the mission to remain with the condemned woman until the last moment. First of all, it should be remembered that far from being fragile, Marie-Anne Crispin was a solid, well-built woman of 1.80 m, muscular as a tank top.

When the executioner Guire, a hooded Halloween ghost dressed all in black like the Grim Reaper, appeared at the door of her cell to bind her hands, he was followed by a few wardens nuns who had come to intervene in case the woman's modesty had to be preserved. Suddenly overexcited by the sight of the executioner, Marie-Anne had a very striking reaction. With unheard-of violence, she hurled herself at the man like a furious Erinye of Mythology, and administered to him a violent volley of blows embellished with a long litany of blasphemy that made the hair stand on end under the starched cornet of the nuns. And we know that Marie-Anne's repertoire in this field was very varied and constantly enriched by new creations. To think that she would let herself be hanged without a little grumbling was to misunderstand her.

While the hangman Guire received the beating of his life, the nuns, who had become cautious, retreated rapidly to the scaffold, where they knew how to find help. Punches were literally raining down on the hooded ghost. His eyes were no longer in front of the holes, so he found himself unable to avoid the formidable fists of the totally unleashed young woman.

Alerted by the terrified nuns, a few guards rushed into the cell to subdue the shrew. In other circumstances, she could have become the incarnation of Quebec feminism and have a bronze

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statue erected between Madeleine de Verchères and Marie-Anne Gaboury. The latter, Louis Riel's grandmother, was unrivalled in her ability to plant with a swift movement her dagger into a wooden door after picking her teeth with the point of the steel blade.

Thanks to this unexpected support, the hangman's terrifying *Way of the Cross* took on another form. Guire was finally able to get up for the second or third time and, without even taking the time to rub his bruises, put the hood holes back in line with his black eyes. In the scuffle that followed, Marie-Anne Crispin was occasionally dragged and sometimes literally carried down the corridor and up the scaffold in the street, under the astonished but at first mute crowd.

The inmates of the prison, thrilled by Marie-Anne last struggle, cheered aloud to encourage the madwoman who, after a moment of weakness under the numbers, had resumed her generous distribution of punches, slaps and kiks.

Ascending the stairs to the scaffold was no mean feat, and the executioner must have regretted a hundred times over the docile female convicts from his far-off England. One after the other, the guards were hurled to the bottom of the scaffold by the young woman's desperate punches.

The executioner, badly battered, tried to keep himself out of reach of the formidable fists of the petticoat colossus. And it was only when her legs and arms were securely garroted that she finally resigned herself to death, while the populace, greatly shaken by such resistance, began to cry *No! No! No! No! No!* so that the

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authorities would pardon her and immediately give up taking her life.

This exceptional performance left a lasting impression on the minds of all the spectators. The shocked populace became agitated and took up Marie-Anne's cause. The thin cordon of policemen and soldiers, which encircled the scaffold, began to undulate dangerously under the pressure of some furious on-lookers. The sheriff of Montreal yelled at the hangman to "*rush the execution, or no one knew what would happen if the mob succeeded in breaking the blockade.*" In a panic, the executioner botched the work so much so that Marie-Anne did not lose consciousness instantly by breaking her vertebrae, as had been planned, but by simple strangulation.

Then the angry mob swept through the streets like a tsunami, smashing windows, tearing down signs, and setting fire to the stalls of shopkeepers who thought they could take advantage of the huge crowd to boost their sales. It was a terrible riot. Several stores burned down, others were looted, as was the case 111 years later, during the famous Montreal police strike on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1969, during which the downtown area was devastated by rioters. Thus, was executed the first woman in Montreal under English colonial rule.



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A few days later, when the fury of the Montrealers had subsided, the husband Antoine Desforges was quietly released from his Montreal prison, with a simple *non-lieu* (dismissal) which absolved him of all blame. The authorities were desperate to hush up this disgraceful affair. Quite happy to have got off so lightly, Antoine returned home without making waves, and tried to make himself forgotten by his compatriots.

As we said, the hangman of Marie-Anne and Jean-Baptiste was called Guire. A journalist wrote about him:

"Evildoers have sometimes succeeded, by a life of suffering and expiation, in obtaining from society the oblivion of their crimes, but never yet has any executioner been able to rid himself of the ostracism which from all eternity has doomed him to shame and opprobrium.[...] Guire did not leave very deep memories. His life remained a mystery to all. Tall, thin, emaciated, with a pale face and disproportionately long hair, he looked like a ghost.

He had formerly been employed as a labourer in a Toronto wholesale house. Having abused his employers' trust, he had been sentenced to two years in prison, and it was after he served it that he arrived in Montreal. He carried out one execution in Quebec City, one in Toronto, and it was he who took charge of those of Desforges and the woman Bélisle, guilty of the heinous crime of Saint-Jérôme, in Montreal. At that moment he displayed the most frightful composure, the frightful sobs uttered by the tortured did not move him. After this execution, he had to hide for a long time to escape the indignation of the populace, who had lost the habit of these horrible spectacles.

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Since 1839, in fact, the gallows had not been erected. Guire disappeared without a trace; he had no relatives in Montreal<sup>82</sup>."

In these lines, the journalist wanted to load the portrait of Guire, because the "frightful sobs" were not uttered by the tortured, but by the executioner himself... under Marie-Anne's punches.

The horror of this execution caused a great scandal and raised a storm of anger in Montreal against the death penalty. As a result, the Quebec clergy began to fear that opposition to capital punishment was gaining momentum. It was necessary to put things in order, for it seemed obvious that the death penalty was part of the Lord's plans<sup>83</sup> so that the faithful would remain so, and Father David-Hercule Beaudry was ordered to repair the scandal by re-writing the history of the execution.

Admittedly, thousands of people had seen with their own eyes this spectacle of turpitude. But if an official version were to correct the disgraceful reality, this very truth would disappear with time, as would the evidence which, in any case, would have lost all credibility in the face of the spiritual dignity of the *official testimony*, which would be published and sold in bookshops, in due form. Only the story published in a book would remain, for newspapers come and go in twenty-four hours. Their archived copies would soon be devoured by mice or mold. We were still a long way from completely bio-indegradable microfiche and mouse-proof computer archives, albeit at the click of a mouse.

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<sup>82</sup> •*The executioners from 1837 to 1871. Details about their origin, deeds, etc.* (1871), s. l., s. é., p.

<sup>83</sup> •Remember the Bible: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

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This "expurgated" version of the final days and the execution of the condemned woman was therefore fabricated out of thin air. It was invented for the sole purpose of masking the horror of reality. They wanted to show that, actually, the condemned had indeed repented of their crimes *thanks to* the execution. They had submitted to a death in accordance with the prescriptions of the Holy Church. Fundamentally, therefore, there had been no miscarriage of Justice with respect to the execution of a woman.

Here is the entirely fictitious account as imagined by Father Beaudry, a specialist in *disinformation* half a century before the Soviet Union:

On Thursday "the prisoners received Holy Communion from the hand of the bishop, and they confessed, without his asking them, that they were guilty of the crime of which they had been convicted, and they asked that this humble confession which they had made of themselves, of their fault, in the prison, should be made public. For, penetrated by the true spirit of penance, they wished to satisfy the Justice of God and of men, by making amends in a striking manner for the great scandal which they had caused. Besides, their whole desire was that their torment should become a great and useful lesson for the whole country.

The bishop, assisted by Mr. Lavallée, parish priest of St. Vincent, remained with the prisoner all the night before the execution. We already know that the sisters never left the widow Bélisle. During that night they lavished upon her the tenderest care, and did not cease to offer their fervent prayers for her without taking a moment's rest. Mrs. McGinn, the jailer's wife, showed great care for the sisters and compassion for the convicts.

On Friday, "as early as seven o'clock in the morning, a huge crowd was moving towards the prison where the execution was to take place. The scaffold was erected to the west of the barrier, about sixteen feet above the wall, so that it was visible even from the river. It was accessed by a staircase placed inside the courtyard.

At eight o'clock, Mr. Villeneuve, the prison chaplain, and Mr. Desmazures, who was to assist him, arrived. Mr. Plamondon, from the bishopric, had been with the condemned with several other priests since six o'clock, which the bishop and the parish priest of St. Vincent had left the day before. A number of Sisters de la Providence came to join their companions who had spent the night in prison. At half-past eight the sheriff appeared, carrying his sword and his Robe of Office. He was accompanied by several bailiffs.

"Mr. Villeneuve, on entering the woman's cell, was astonished to find her seated on her bed. She greeted him with a calmness that showed the peace in which she kept her soul. *"Father, she said to him, how well I have been since I received communion! But I would be even stronger if I had received communion this morning*<sup>84</sup>.»

After the chaplain had also visited the prisoners in particular, several members of the press and some other citizens, at the instigation of Dr. Beaubien, were admitted to join the condemned. They were astonished at the surprising change that had taken place in the woman mind since her conviction. She was busy praying. Her vain, wicked, arrogant look had given way to a sort of

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<sup>84</sup> •Oh, sweet dreams!

staggering calm. She often kissed her crucifix while devoutly reciting the rosary. Mr. Villeneuve asked her if she was ready to die: "Yes, Father," she replied, "*Oh! How I long to die and go to heaven!»*

Then turning to the male prisoner, he asked him if he was glad to die. He replied, "*Yes, I am glad to die; After the crime I have committed, I am not worthy to live. However, I hope that God in His mercy will receive me into Heaven.*" The priest advised them to be of good courage, to remember that Our Lord had also suffered, and that he had died for us all. The prisoners were very pale; and their faces bore the imprint of the cruel mental agony they had had to endure.

"The time set for the execution (ten o'clock) was approaching. There were few who did not hope, against all hope, that a revocation of the sentence would come; but for the prisoners, they were prepared for their fate. At nine-forty-five the woman was taken to a private room to be dressed in the clothes in which she was to die. Her spiritual director had prepared her for this new ordeal. The Sisters of Providence took off her clothes, which she kissed, saying, "*I kiss for the last time the garments of exile.*" She was clothed in a long black robe that had been brought to her by the sisters. She raised it to her lips, saying: "*May I gladly kiss the robe that will lead me to heaven!*"

Then the prisoners were taken to Dr. Beaubien's private office (the prison doctor); first the woman, and shortly afterwards the man, wearing the ordinary costume of the condemned, and holding in his hand a crucifix, which he kissed lovingly as he entered the room.

"The hangman had already arrived, dressed in a black robe and with the face covered with a hood. He set to work tying the arms of the condemned, and to fit the fatal rope around their necks. This was perhaps the saddest sight to behold. The woman made no resistance and seemed perfectly resigned to her fate. However, as the hangman had seized her arms in a brutal manner, and Marie-Anne seemed to be in horrible pain while he was binding her, the sisters begged that the rope should be loosened: *"Leave, said the condemned woman, let me have this additional suffering to offer to God before I die."*

"For his unfortunate companion, a strong and vigorous man, it was a terrible ordeal to see himself thus bound. The priest warned him, to guard him against the emotion which the rebellious nature must have caused him to feel. He reminded him how Our Lord had been garroted and flogged. Then Desforges allowed himself to be carried away without betraying the slightest emotion in his face. All then knelt down to say the Prayers of the Dying, which were recited with great fervor and emotion by the priests and other attendants. Many of those present shed tears of tenderness, and perhaps the most touching scene (says a Protestant newspaper) was to see the emotion of the sisters: *"Was it not surprising, he continues, to see them, all purity, all goodness, in so far as purity and goodness can be found on earth, to see them so afflicted and so moved?"*

"The prisoners seemed to have already taken leave of the Earth and all earthly thoughts. Desforges was pale, but full of firmness, keeping his eyes fixed on his crucifix and praying fervently. Marie-Anne looked tired. Several times she seemed on the point of

fainting, but the presence of the sisters, and the words "Courage, my child!" which the priest addressed to her with the accent of tenderness, restored her strength.

"Everything was ready for this great atonement. It was only a question of ordering the sad procession to the scaffold. The sheriff led the way. Next came Desforges, supported on one side by Mr. Villeneuve and on the other by Mr. Desmazures, dressed in surplice and stole, and several other priests, all reciting the *Miserere*. Next came the widow Béisle, supported on each side by a sister of Providence, and accompanied by eight other sisters reciting the same prayer, which expresses in such touching terms all the sentiments of true penance.

The condemned persons crossed the prison courtyard with a slow but firm step and ascended the staircase that leads to the scaffold, composed of eighty-four steps, without showing any fear or weakness. They seemed to be supported, in this terrible moment of trial, and in the midst of this gloomy apparatus, by an alien force, and to meet death with a firmness and courage that could only come from above.

When they were on the scaffold, when they were about to be launched into Eternity, after the executioner had adjusted the rope around their necks, when all hope of escaping death had vanished, they confessed their crime, said they were repentant, commended themselves to the Mercy of God, and implored the help of the saints.

The priest then advanced to the edge of the scaffold and said to the crowd: "*My brethren, the two condemned charge me to tell*

*you that they acknowledge their guilt and that they are resigned to their punishment, offering it courageously in expiation for their crime, hoping that the scaffold will be for them the ladder that will lead them to heaven. And so I ask all the Catholics present here to recite for them some Pater and Ave, so that God may preserve their good disposition until the end.»*

At these words, the immense multitude of those present (with a few exceptions) numbering at least thirty thousand, fell on their knees and recited the prayer that was required of them. It is probable that if the priest had also addressed the people in English, all, without exception, would have fallen on their knees, for many Protestants were seen to do as the Catholics did.

Then the condemned were given indulgence *in articulo mortis*; They kissed the crucifix lovingly, prayed aloud, and finally the rope was tied to the top of the gallows. Then, at the moment when the unfortunate condemned were only waiting for the last blow, there was some delay, owing to some unknown cause.

"This terrible moment could be very fatal to the tortured. The priest saw the woman trembling; then with great emotion and in a loud voice, which is heard by many, he cries out to them: "*Courage! Confidence! One more moment and you'll be in Heaven!* Tears flow from all sides. There is a perfect silence... Desforges can be heard saying: "*Jesus, Mary, Joseph, have mercy on me.*" The signal is given, the trapdoor is lowered, and the hanging victims soon breathe their last.

"The sound of this terrible trap door was heard even inside the prison. At that frightful moment, the prisoners, who were in the

cells adjoining the gloomy dungeon which the widow Bélige had just left, uttered a cry of astonishment. All of them, Protestants as well as Catholics, fell on their knees around the sister, who was charged in that part of the prison with saying the prayers prescribed by the bishop to obtain a good death for the two unfortunates who were undergoing the last torture.

"The bodies were laid in the holy land, and placed near each other, with an epitaph which will remind all future generations of their misfortune at having committed so great a crime, and their happiness at having been able to repair it by rigorous penance and exemplary torture, which have earned them the honors of ecclesiastical burial<sup>85</sup>."



Thus ended the *text of disinformation* in which the two condemned had died together, devoutly, on a double scaffold. A little extra line, invented by the fertile creative imagination of David Hercule Beaudry, illustrates well the serene holiness with which the Church wants to adorn Jean-Baptiste Desforges: "Someone had the indiscretion to tell him [to tell Jean-Baptiste] one day that one of the prisoners had offered himself to be the hangman. He himself told this news with a smile to the sisters who visited him, and commented: "Poor wretch! Let him be, since he feels capable of being so; for there must always be one. As far as I'm concerned,

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<sup>85</sup> •Beaudry, 1858, pp. 20-26.

he added, I should be unable to do so. I forgive him with all my heart; and I pray for him<sup>86</sup>." A holy man who had not hesitated to suffocate his sister-in-law under a pillow!

In favour of retaining capital punishment, David-Hercule Beaudry concludes:

"The details we have just gone into prove, quite clearly, that capital punishment benefits the guilty parties, by providing them with the means to atone for their crime, and society as a whole, by giving it one of those terrible examples which make the most intrepid scoundrels tremble.

If, therefore, certain newspapers take the liberty in the future of crying out against the death penalty, on the pretext that, in this age of enlightenment, it can have no result, we need only glance at this relation, to be convinced of the contrary.

It remains for us to bless God for the infinite mercies which he has just exercised towards two great culprits, and to consider from what sources he has caused the torrents of divine graces to flow, with which he has showered them<sup>87</sup>."

Clearly, that this text represents a veritable piece of anthology in the subtle *art of lies* and *disinformation*, written with genius by an impostor, David-Hercule Beaudry, whose cunning and perfidy have nothing to envy to those of the Soviets during the Cold War. It seems clear that this fictional account inspired Alexis André<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> •Beaudry, 1858, pp. 29-30.

<sup>87</sup> •Id., p. 33.

<sup>88</sup> •Alexis André was a Breton priest, Oblate of Mary Immaculate, born in 1832 in Bretagne (France) and died in Calgary in 1893.

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when he described in a thousand edifying details the last days of Louis Riel's last days and his alleged spiritual volte-face. André wanted to show that the famous leader of the French Métis in the West had made amends by joining the straight and right path of the Roman Catholic Church, before he died, *thanks to the death penalty, which was certainly part of God's Plans*. The Hero of the West was no longer critical of the undemocratic behaviour of the Clergy who had made common cause with the Ontario Orange-men to force the Métis people to give up their project for a province of Manitoba based on democracy. It became clear that the Métis of the West had to submit to tyranny by following the example of their virtuous and exemplary leader. But who will ever know the truth since Louis Riel wasn't even allowed to speak before he died?

Here as there, the end justified the means.



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*The final Swing*

Love and hate were once the main purveyors of the gallows. The tragic fates of three women executed by hanging in the days of New France and the United-Canada bear witness to this. Reconstructing the events from historical articles and, above all, from the Ottawa Criminal Archives, the author recounts these little-known stories that animated the lives of former Canadians:

- The crime and hanging of a young Montreal slave, Marie-Joseph Angélique, who, out of hatred, set fire to half the city of Montreal in 1734.
- the murders perpetrated by the legendary Marie-Josephette Corriveau, and her execution in 1763, on the very spot where Quebec's National Assembly now stands.
- the crimes committed by Marie-Anne Crispin, the murder of her husband and that of her lover's wife, as well as her problematic death on the gallows with her accomplice in 1858, which provoked an extremely violent riot in the streets of Montreal.

This plunge into the heart of the crimes, trials and executions gives us an unusual opportunity to relive a part of Quebec's judicial History.



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